THREE LONG STORIES

(The Motherless Ones, Shambhudas, The Gallows)

Original Maithili book "Shambhudas"

By

Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal

Shambhudas

Original Maithili Long Story Collection authored

by

Jagdish Prasad Mandal

THREE LONG STORIES

Translated into English

by

Dr. Ram Ashish Singh

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Pallavi Prakashan
Berma/Nirmali

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Translated from the Maithili collection of long stories Shambhudas
by Jagdish Prasad Mandal
Translated into English by Dr. Ram Ashish Singh

THREE LONG STORIES is the English translation of Jagdish Prasad Mandal's Maithili collection of long stories Shambhudas, translated by Dr. Ram Ashish Singh. The volume brings together three long stories: The Motherless Ones, Shambhudas and The Gallows. Each story is rooted in the lived social world of rural Mithila.

Across these narratives, Mandal explores motherless childhood, the struggle of folk art under power and patronage, and the moral reckoning of a condemned life. Expansive in design yet intimate in feeling, the stories are shaped by village speech, labour, memory, kinship, caste, poverty, compassion and ethical self-examination.

In Shambhudas, a gifted musician rises from hardship through his art, yet becomes trapped within a system that subordinates art to power. The Motherless Ones portrays with tenderness the lives of children deprived of their mother, while The Gallows transforms punishment into a searching inquiry into crime, responsibility and human awakening.

THREE LONG STORIES offers English readers a compelling introduction to Mandal's long-form storytelling. Here rural Mithila emerges as a living terrain of social struggle, artistic dignity and moral reflection.

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to readers
who seek in literature the dignity of labour, the moral strength of art, the pain of ordinary lives, and the living voice of rural Mithila.

- Dr. Ram Ashish Singh

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A Few Words

☰

Jagdish Prasad Mandal enters the minds of the people; he enters the mind of Barham Baba as well. That is why he is able to sense that both Barham Baba and the people are filled with joy. He watches Shambhua becoming Shambhu, and then becoming Darbari Das, Shambhudas, too. The fall of Shambhudas beneath a crumbling order is a sign of the disorder into which the art of Mithila has been thrown.

The central characters in Jagdish Prasad Mandal's stories do not lose their way, neither in Bhaintak Laava nor in Bisaandh. Then how did Shambhudas become a Darbari Das? Has some change come over Jagdish Prasad Mandal? Is he growing tired? Is he beginning to lose?

But if we look at him with a deeper eye, Shambhudas is in no way inferior to the heroes of Bhaintak Laava or Bisaandh. Then why is he losing? Or why is Jagdish Prasad Mandal making him lose? After all, he is the writer, the god of all these characters. Why, then, does he not make Shambhudas win?

Jagdish Prasad Mandal's characters are never creatures of make-believe. That is why Shambhudas wins on the economic front, in the sphere where work is done

with one’s own hands. But he becomes entangled in the classical snare of art, and of literature too, a snare fashioned by those who count and classify everything on their fingers.

He had to fight his economic condition. He fought, and he won. In the field of art, however, he became a courtier; only then could he survive. Yet even here Shambhudas raised a flag of rebellion. His decision to forget home and family and not to marry proves that his becoming a Darbari Das was not an act of convenience, but an act of helplessness. It was for that reason that he chose not to marry. He did not become an opportunist for the sake of home and family. His decision to renounce home and family and remain unmarried is, in truth, his repentance for having become a Darbari Das.

A parallel tradition will prevent art from turning into a Darbari Das. If Shambhudas loses, Mithila loses. Jagdish Prasad Mandal will not lose; Mithila will lose, if Mithila fails to recognise this warning.

- Gajendra Thakur
Editor, Videha e-Journal

Lives at the Threshold: Translating Jagdish Prasad Mandal's Moral World

A pair of newborn children struggle for life beside their dying mother; a village boy follows the sound of music beyond the boundaries of home; a condemned prisoner spends his final hours retracing the road that brought him to the gallows. These are intensely individual moments, yet in Jagdish Prasad Mandal's fiction no life remains individual for long. Private experience opens into questions of kinship, labour, custom, power, responsibility and social change. The three narratives gathered here may therefore be read not merely as accounts of separate lives, but as moral biographies of a society in transition. In **The Motherless Ones**, the question is who will sustain vulnerable life when biological protection fails. In **Shambhudas**, it is what becomes of talent when art must negotiate with patronage and changing material conditions. In **The Gallows**, it is how an offender comes to recognise the road by which repeated choices, indulgence and power have carried him towards judgement. Mandal's moral world begins at this threshold, where individual fate becomes a social question.

The Maithili original calls these works **dīrgha kathā**, and I have deliberately retained the English designation "long stories". They exceed the concentrated movement usually associated with the short story without assuming the full architecture of the novel. Their form allows a central life to gather around itself generations, occupations, institutions, memories and social change. A birth opens

into the economics of land and education; a child's attraction to music expands into the social organisation of performance; and a prisoner's final hours lead backwards into childhood, family, landlord power and politics. Mandal's long story is thus less a stretched short story than a social form of remembering, combining narration, oral memory, life-history and inward reflection while permitting time to widen around a character.

The Motherless Ones begins with a crisis of birth. Sushila gives birth to twins in a setting where medical care is distant, transport uncertain and time itself dangerous. Her collapse is therefore more than a private catastrophe. The narrative exposes a rural world in which survival may depend upon knowledge carried by women, improvised arrangements and the speed of communal response. Sugia, the **palhain**, becomes decisive. Faced with newborn children whose mother cannot feed them, she breastfeeds them herself and resolves that they shall not die. The act is physical and immediate; it is also the story's first decisive ethical act. Her milk crosses the boundary between households, enlarging biological motherhood into an ethic of shared care. Sunayana, Tapesar and Sugia together form a fragile but resilient structure of care. Dheeraj and Ghurni are motherless, but the story refuses to make "motherless" synonymous with "without care".

That distinction deepens as the twins grow. Care in Mandal is never only feeling. It requires food, time, bodily labour, money, land and the reorganisation of a household. Tapesar's fatherhood is remarkable because he keeps remaking the conditions of survival. He sells land when illness and necessity leave no alternative; later he reorganises cultivation, adopts new agricultural tools, sends the children to school and thinks continuously about their future. Land is not a passive possession. It is livelihood, ancestral memory, emergency reserve and the material basis of a possible future. To sell it is to cut into the material history of a family, yet to refuse may mean failing the living. When Chetanath later asks to teach Dheeraj and Ghurni music, the struggle for subsistence opens towards another inheritance: art, discipline and the guru–disciple tradition.

The title **The Motherless Ones** therefore acquires a meaning larger than bereavement. The story separates motherhood as a biological condition from care as a shared human responsibility. It does not sentimentalise the village; the text knows that the motherless, the fatherless, widows and the poor may also face contempt and superstition. Community can wound as well as sustain. This is precisely why Sugia's labour, Sunayana's endurance and Tapesar's persistence matter. Their care is not the automatic virtue of an idealised rural world. It is work performed against exhaustion, scarcity and prejudice. The story's deepest movement is from vulnerability to relation: an endangered life becomes survivable when responsibility ceases to belong to one person alone.

If **The Motherless Ones** asks how a life is sustained, **Shambhudas** asks how a gift is recognised, trained and finally constrained. Shambhu is born into a family of agricultural labourers and sharecroppers. Art is not an ornament added to security; it enters his life as hunger, curiosity and direction. His first school is the **kirtan** mandali. A khanjari becomes an instrument of apprenticeship, and participation in kirtan, bhajan and village ceremonies teaches him rhythm through practice. Later he studies the harmonium, dholak, cymbals and other instruments, discovering their interdependence. From their ability to keep step he draws an intuition about society itself: no single instrument makes the music. Different forms and capacities must enter into relation before harmony becomes possible. The musical ensemble becomes a social metaphor without ceasing to be music.

The **Ramleela** troupe enlarges this informal school. It recognises Shambhu's talent, gives it discipline and places him within a wider network of performers. Mandal's account of Ramleela matters because performance is never detached from the society that houses it. A stage requires material, space, audiences and agreement; it also brings to the surface questions of gender, caste, propriety and collective participation. Ramleela stands beside kirtan, bhajan and other performative traditions within a living ecology of village art. Religion, entertainment, devotion and artistry cannot be separated

into neat categories. The village does not merely possess folk culture; it negotiates it. Art becomes an occasion on which a community discovers both its divisions and its capacity for cooperation.

Shambhu's many-sided ability soon makes him indispensable. He can sing, play instruments, dance and act; the troupe offers mobility that his birth circumstances could scarcely promise. Yet Mandal does not turn this ascent into a simple success story. The decline of feudal households, migration, erosion and the fragmentation of older cultural arrangements alter the conditions under which music survives. Shambhu eventually becomes Shambhudas, a court singer attached to an order already collapsing. His material survival and artistic freedom no longer coincide. Shambhu does not fail because he lacks talent. He is diminished by an order that offers art survival only at the price of dependence. His transformation into Shambhudas thus becomes a warning about the fate of Mithila's artistic traditions. It also raises a question that extends beyond the story: what kinds of institutions can support art without possessing it? Mandal's ending makes that question inseparable from the broken soil and altered social order of Mithila.

The Gallows turns from care and art to punishment, but its subject is not crime in the narrow sense. Its pressure comes first from time. Baldev knows that at noon he will be hanged, and every minute before it acquires unusual moral density. In confinement he looks backwards. What emerges is not a defence, but an inquiry into formation. He remembers a stolen toy, his mother's lie in his defence, petty theft from orchards, early intoxication, bad company, the swagger of the buffalo boys, trespass upon other people's fields and the gradual attraction of power. A guard asks how he came, little by little, to deserve such punishment. That question gives the narrative its method. Baldev's life is reconstructed as a sequence in which one tolerated wrong makes the next easier to inhabit.

As Baldev grows older, his wrongdoing acquires institutional protection. He becomes associated with the estate of an absentee landlord, gains the position of bailiff and learns the uses of fear. The authority of the landlord and his own bullying strength reinforce one

another. He abuses villagers, takes what he wishes and discovers that power can make resistance costly. Political change does not automatically reform him. When he moves from estate power into leadership and electoral faction, old habits find a new vocabulary. In the final criminal episode, he says another man committed the murder, yet asks the question that defeats self-exoneration: if the murder happened before his eyes, where was he? Mandal allows social causes to enter the courtroom of conscience, but not to acquit the accused. Baldev admits that he is a criminal and that his wrongdoing extends across his life. Social explanation here is not moral absolution.

The most powerful figure through which Baldev understands this life is the contrast between the human road and the cattle track, **dagar** and **dagahar**. A road has direction, limits and a relation to other travellers; a cattle track wanders where immediate appetite leads. Baldev finally realises that his error was not simply a mistake, but that he had taken "the road of mistake itself". The gallows is thereby transformed from a legal endpoint into a retrospective image of an entire moral journey. The law judges the final act; Mandal's narrative examines the long social road by which the offender arrived there. Yet the story also asks what the law cannot decide: when does indulgence become complicity, when does patronage become corruption, and how long may a society tolerate the making of a dangerous man before it discovers him only as a criminal?

The guards are essential to this transformation. At first they belong to the machinery of imprisonment; gradually they become listeners. Their questions, interruptions and moments of identification make Baldev's last account possible. They cannot alter his sentence, but they can restore the human act of being heard. Parallel to the prison, Kamini and Sushil confront the burden left by husband and father. Their conversation prevents punishment from appearing as an event confined to the condemned body. The law sentences one person, but the consequences enter an entire household, shaping its shame, memory and future. **The Gallows** thus opens a space between legal judgement and moral self-knowledge.

Baldev's late awakening cannot undo what he has done. In Mandal's fiction, recognition is not redemption by itself; it is the final capacity to see the shape of one's acts.

Seen together, the three stories form a sequence of responsibility. **The Motherless Ones** asks who will carry the burden of a life that cannot yet carry itself. **Shambhudas** asks who will protect the conditions in which talent may become art without surrendering autonomy. **The Gallows** asks who bears responsibility when repeated wrong choices are encouraged, shielded or amplified by family, patronage and power. In all three, the individual is socially made. Family, labour, caste, land, art, markets, politics and community enter the formation of a person. Yet Mandal never permits the social to erase the personal. Sugia chooses to care; Tapesar chooses to labour and reorganise; Shambhu commits himself to art, though the institutions that sustain it eventually constrain him; Baldev repeatedly chooses wrongly and finally recognises those choices. The collection holds two truths together: society shapes human possibility, and the human being remains answerable within that shaping.

For this reason Mithila should not be read as picturesque background. Season, rain, flood, drought, field, **chaur**, migration and the changing economy of labour alter what characters can do. A flooded field changes the worth of land. A distant school changes the future of children. A shifting river and declining rural livelihoods alter the circulation of artists. Kirtan, Ramleela, the palhain, Barham Sthan, aarati and proverbial speech are likewise not ethnographic ornaments. They are forms through which social knowledge is stored and transmitted. Mandal's rural characters do not exist to provide local colour. They think, dispute, calculate, remember, misjudge and revise themselves. The local world is intellectually active, and through its particularity it raises questions of care, dignity, artistic freedom, guilt, justice and responsibility that no single region owns.

Mandal's narrative imagination grows out of his sustained proximity to agricultural life and rural labour. He writes from within the rhythms he describes, attentive to differences of land, crop,

season, labour and survival. This closeness gives working and marginal characters something more valuable than pity: it gives them thought. They are allowed to interpret the world that acts upon them. Across a large body of Maithili writing, Mandal returns to inequality, caste, labour, feudal residues, market change and political distortion, while resisting the temptation to separate the individual from collective conditions. His novel **Pangu** received the Sahitya Akademi Award for Maithili in 2021. What matters here, however, is not an inventory of achievements, but the consistency of Mandal's vision: society is examined from the ground on which people work, suffer, improvise and judge.

His craft follows from that position. Mandal often begins with an action and enters thought without announcing the transition. A gesture at the hearth, a field being sold, an instrument being handled or a guard asking a question becomes the opening for interior debate. His characters think in images available to their lived world. Soil, seed, irrigation, creepers, streams, cattle, fire, darkness and seasons are not merely descriptive objects; they are instruments of reasoning. His extended similes often return to an image until its moral significance deepens. Repetition carries something of oral narration, where an idea is turned and heard again before it settles. The narrative repeatedly travels from person to society and back. Secondary figures therefore rarely remain decorative: a palhain, grandmother, performer, guard or son may become the consciousness through which the ethical field changes.

Translating such prose requires a choice about proximity. My aim has not been to Anglicise Mandal's world, nor to leave it sealed behind an excess of untranslated language. Some words carry social meanings for which an apparently convenient English equivalent would be thinner than the original. Palhain is more than a generic "midwife"; chaur names a particular low-lying agricultural landscape; **darwajja** is at once an entrance and a social sitting space; kirtan and Ramleela belong to practices that are religious, performative and communal together. Where such terms bear cultural weight, I have retained them and provided a glossary. The purpose is

not to display foreignness, but to avoid pretending that one language divides experience in exactly the same places as another.

The greater difficulty lies beyond nouns. Maithili proverbial speech, forms of address, repetitions, rural comparisons and the movement between narration and inward monologue carry both meaning and cadence. Literal substitution may preserve dictionary sense while losing the way a thought arrives. I have therefore treated translation as a recreation of sense, voice and cultural memory rather than as a mechanical transfer of words. At times English requires a clearer syntactic path; at others the original image must remain strange enough to keep its imaginative force. Every such decision involves loss as well as recovery. A translation may approach the original, listen to it carefully and make a new reading possible, but it can never replace the original from which it arises.

At the end of these three long stories, the threshold with which they began remains before us in altered form. Dheeraj and Ghurni move towards life because care has become collective labour. Shambhu moves towards art, yet as Shambhudas he reveals the cost at which a social order may choose to sustain its artists. Baldev moves towards death, but in the last hours acquires the terrible clarity of seeing the route by which he arrived there. None of these lives can be understood apart from Mithila, and none is confined by it. Rooted in the soil, speech and social memory of Mithila, these stories travel beyond their place of origin because the questions they ask belong everywhere: Who sustains a vulnerable life? What allows art to remain free? And at what point does a society become answerable for the road taken by one of its own?

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The Motherless Ones

Just as a devotee, after bathing in the Sarayu, sees Lord Rama the moment he enters the temple, Tapesar, seated in the fragrant warmth of his courtyard, was watching the preparations for feeding the community. His mind was cool, quiet and even, like the still water of a pond, absorbed in the smell of the courtyard. Just then Ghurni placed before him a shining steel plate with fifteen or twenty dried bari, one barā, and a glass of water, and said:

"Babu, taste a little and see whether it has turned out well."

Seeing his smiling daughter and the barā-bari arranged on the plate, Tapesar was lost for a moment. The word maituggar came back to him, the motherless one. But Ghurni did not think it proper to leave the iron pan on the hearth and stand there waiting, so she went back to the chulha. As Tapesar put into his mouth a bari shaped like a lotus petal, he remembered what he had done for his family.

It was the month of Sawan. Early in the morning the clouds had burst and it had rained heavily. From midnight the easterly wind had risen, and it kept blowing; now and then sharp gusts came with it. As the day advanced, the force of the easterly wind grew stronger. Sushila told her mother-in-law that labour pains had begun. Hearing her daughter-in-law, Sunayana asked Tapesar to call the palhain, the village birth attendant.

Lying on the bedding in the verandah, Sushila felt as though a battle had spread within her. On one side, the pain of childbirth, with

all its force, was attacking every joint and fibre of her body. On the other, her mind, caught in the difficult fortress of life, was being rocked by waves of happiness. It was the greatest work of a woman's life. As heavy as the task was, so deeply desired was the gift of motherhood.

Seeing the fury of the easterly wind, Sunayana was left stunned. Until that day, childbirth had always taken place in the small delivery hut, a hut whose thatch could not hold back the gusts of wind. It was not like an ashram hut, its thatch plastered and sealed. But what house can truly protect a child of the forest? Anxiety rose in Sunayana. She left the delivery hut aside and spread the bedding in the cattle room. While spreading it, she thought: the fire for warmth had already been lit; she had brought only torn and old clothes.

Peeping out from the cattle room, Sunayana looked towards her daughter-in-law. Sushila seemed somewhat at ease, and Sunayana's mind grew a little steadier.

As Tapesar went to the palhain's house, the burden of his own task came over him. What work does a man have in such a grave matter? And yet the palhain's house, though only a few steps away, seemed farther than that. Like someone swinging on a bending branch, Tapesar moved unsteadily and reached her house to give the news. Seeing her own good fortune rise before her, the palhain smiled and said:

"You go ahead. I have kept the cow's feed ready. I shall run straight after you."

Hardly five minutes had passed after the palhain arrived when a son was born. As soon as the boy set foot on the earth, joy spread through Tapesar's family like a flash of lightning. As the palhain wiped the child's body, gifts began to dance in her mind: forty tamma as nichhaur, nipnaun, the fee for cutting the cord and for laarhi-purain. Besides, she thought, I am the birth attendant; I have the right to ask. When I leave, I shall ask for a sajmain too. They will certainly give the sidha. The palhain's mind wandered into calculations. When

God gives someone a child, He makes me a sharer in it too. Just as the child's life is in my hands, my own life too lies in someone else's hands.

Inwardly the palhain's heart filled with happiness. Smiling, she said to Sunayana:

"Kaki, it is your first grandson. Will you dress me in silk?"

The grandmother's mind, trembling in the force of that current, nodded and said:

"Why speak of one? I shall dress you in seven."

Happily the palhain said:

"The child's face is exactly like Tapesar Baua's."

Hearing the palhain, Sushila, lying in pain on the bedding, felt her chastity silently affirmed. Finding a moment, she murmured:

"What a flatterer she is!"

But the palhain did not hear her, and so Sushila said nothing more.

Tapesar's mind was calm like the water of a lake. Ordinary circumstances bring ordinary thoughts. Just as skill holds fast even to the hardest and most awkward work, Tapesar's gaze too ran towards the work of life and settled there. He thought: his wife was only twenty or twenty-one; there was not even a trace of illness in her body. As soon as his eyes reached the son, his mind swelled at the arrival of a child who was, in the eyes of the family, a kind of wealth. Just as one wishes to look again and again when the first flower or first fruit appears on a planted tree, so the desire kept rising in Tapesar's mind. But knowing the place to be forbidden to him, he kept away. Even so, like a lotus with a broken stalk swaying in the pond with the wind, Tapesar's mind rose and fell on waves of happiness.

A thought came to him: in the relationship between man and woman, a child too is a powerful bond. The possibility of the family breaking apart always remains. At once his mind flew beyond himself

and reached his mother and father. The moment it went there, his heart began to ache. Just as a woman's beauty increases after she attains motherhood, does not something similar happen to a man when he attains fatherhood? Then, like a reel of cinema, the whole life of his son, from birth to the final moment, began to dance before Tapesar.

After a short while, pain began again in Sushila. With time, it increased. Sushila began to writhe.

Seeing her restlessness, Sunayana said to the palhain:

"Daughter-in-law, you look at her. I shall hold the child."

The moment the palhain placed her hand on Sushila's stomach, she understood that another child was to be born. She said:

"Kaki, there will be one more child."

Hearing this, Sunayana felt as though thunder had cracked inside her. She called out loudly to Tapesar:

"Baua, Baua!"

Startled, Tapesar replied:

"Yes, Ma!"

Sunayana said:

"Stay in the courtyard!"

About twenty minutes later, a daughter was born. The fragrance of joy that had filled the courtyard until then suddenly came to a halt. As soon as the second child was born, Sushila's body went limp. Looking towards Sunayana, the palhain said:

"Kaki, the easterly wind is lashing hard. Keep the fire burning properly. Of course, everything lies in God's hands, but whatever can be done, we must do. As though knowingly, God has increased the sorrow. You keep watch over the first child, and I shall look after the second."

Saying this, the palhain began to clean and wipe the child. Seeing that the breath was faint, she put her mouth to the child's

mouth and blew again and again, setting the rhythm of breath right. Looking at the signs in the child, the palhain's mind spoke within her: both children would certainly hold on to life.

The palhain's gaze fell upon the work she had done in the past. Was this the first time such a thing had happened? It had happened to many women. In some cases both children had survived; in some, one child; and in some, the mother herself had gone along with the child. The work was uncertain, but from her side she would make every possible effort.

In the meantime, Sunayana asked Sushila:

"Daughter-in-law, how do you feel?"

Lying half-conscious, Sushila, seeing her life breaking apart, answered her mother-in-law with a gesture of the hand. The fading colour of her face too kept saying that she would not survive. Seeing Sushila's gesture, Sunayana grew frightened. A thought rose within her: Tapesar would fall into a great calamity. The poor man would be trapped in bewilderment and distress. I have grown old; whatever can be done, I shall somehow manage. But the calamity is not small. There are fields and farming, cattle and livestock, kin and family; and on top of that two little chicks have been born. How will he manage? Neither his wife will survive nor even one child! And how many days shall I live? Everything will be lost for the poor man.

Anger rose in Sunayana, and she muttered:

"O God! What cruel turn of mind came over You that You brought such suffering upon the poor man?"

Sitting in the courtyard, Tapesar thought: one can carry on one's head only as large a bundle as can be lifted. How long can anyone keep a very large bundle balanced there? But what of that? While life remains, it is not right to accept defeat. Working and working, fighting and fighting, whatever happens will be seen.

Just as, when a battle between two armies reaches its final stretch, both sides begin to know who will win and who will lose, so even among the defeated many kinds of thoughts arise. Some wish to

run away from the battlefield; some wish to hide in some broken corner. Yet there are others who, seeing their own sacrifice before them, keep their weapons raised of their own will until the very end. How could they lower them? Was the companion of one's life to be left to fill the bellies of crows and dogs, while one became a slave and rotted in the enemy's prison?

Just then Sushila spoke her final words to the palhain, to her mother-in-law and to her husband:

"I shall not live. I am the greatest sinner in the world, for I could not even protect myself. You all must look after both the children."

As she spoke, her eyes closed. Life still remained in her, but she lost consciousness.

Hearing Sushila's words, the palhain was startled. Good God! The greatest burden had now fallen upon her. The burden of sustaining lives just born. Until now she had done so many difficult tasks, but when had she ever faced work like this? What she knew was little; what lay unknown before her was far greater.

The more she turned towards her own helplessness, the more her anxiety grew. The children had to be fed milk. The mother's condition lay before her eyes. O God, show some way! She remembered her own child. I too have milk, she thought, then why should I be so frightened? But her own child was already six months old; her milk was not meant for newborn infants. If she kept thinking like this, the children would die. O God, You know best! Saying this within herself, the palhain put both children to her breasts and began to feed them. Seeing them suckle, her mind danced with happiness. She resolved that she would not let the children die. That very day she would ask them to arrange goat's milk, and from time to time she would give them some of her own. But her own child too was only six months old. How could she begin giving lentil-water before the seventh month? As motherhood awoke within her, the palhain murmured:

"What greater work can there be for me on this earth? If these children have come to see the world, they will certainly see it."

Hearing her daughter-in-law's words, Sunayana began to lose consciousness. Her mind flew and wandered like a kash flower in the wind. As soon as her eyes fell on the children's faces, she reproached God in her wandering mind and muttered:

"From which birth are You recovering a debt from these children? What fault is there in these helpless little ones? If You did not like them, why did You not settle the debt in the womb itself? Only someone like You could bring such suffering upon such children."

With a heart shaken to its depths, Sunayana broke into sobs. On one side, such a blow had fallen upon the poor woman, her daughter-in-law, that her priceless womb had been laid waste; and along with that, the children were left hanging in uncertainty. Yet her own lineage too was being laid waste. Being weary and worn, she might place a stone upon her chest and keep watching, but Tapesar was not like that. He was young, in the full force of life; who knew, he might lose his balance somewhere. Who would look after whom? Just as, when a bundle on one's head opens in the flowing current of a stream, its contents scatter and float away with the water, some retrieved and some swept off, so Sunayana's thoughts scattered, some flying away, some stopping, while her chest kept trembling.

Sitting by the pillar of the verandah, Tapesar's mind accepted that he too had made a mistake. Whatever he had seen until that day had settled in his mind. Were the reports in the radio and newspapers false, that human beings could have two, three, even four children at a time? Just as people, without thinking, follow behaviour handed down by tradition, become blind followers of a line, and go on carrying the dead weight of custom, so had he done. And yet, when the string slips from the hand, does a kite not drift away into the sky? Was that not how he too had drifted? It was something to be thought over and understood: how much care one child would need, and how much two children would need. But he had not understood it. Had he

understood it earlier, such a day would not have come. The family would be ruined. The lineage would vanish. But what remedy was there now for what had already been missed?

Then, as a tender shoot emerges from a tangled arikanchan creeper, a shoot of hope rose in Tapesar's mind. In his drenched mind, like the current of a stream, came the thought: on one side, I see the family and the lineage being uprooted and ruined; and yet the past, the present and the future too seem to be growing green before my eyes. Seeing the family flourishing in that vision, Tapesar's heart overflowed. Just as, while crossing a current, even after placing the feet carefully, the trembling foot keeps slipping back, so Tapesar's mind, instead of growing steady, began to slip. But planting his feet on the earth with all his strength, he thought: Mother is still alive, I too am here, and on top of that there are two infants at the breast. Why, then, should the family be uprooted? Yes, it is true that, between man and woman, for the sake of the child, the mother is the first storehouse of food. But the spirit of the age too says that, by fate, today's children are being cut off from their mother's milk. That is to say, people, for the sake of shaping their bodies, arrange artificial milk and wean their children from the breast. Even so, children live. Then why should these children not live?

Seeing Tapesar's grief-stricken face, Sunayana came out of the house to console him and said:

"Child, like the wheel of a cart, life keeps moving through joy and sorrow. What will come of grieving like this? God's ways are unfathomable. I am still alive. While I am here, what sorrow can you have?"

Tapesar lifted his moist eyes and looked at his mother's face. Sunayana's chest was trembling like the wick of a lamp in the wind. Yet just as a lamp keeps burning while bearing the gusts of air, so, hearing the flame of his mother's courage and the thought that dripped from her words, the shaking ground of Tapesar's mind began to grow firm. He thought: this very mother, taking me to be the man of the house, has considered me her support; and now she herself

stands as my support. Like a bud opening into a flower, Tapesar's mind began to bloom. Just then the palhain lifted her face and said:

"Kaki, come here."

Hearing the palhain's voice, Sunayana cast a glance at Tapesar and moved towards the delivery room. A thought arose in her: it is true that a dark room is full of snakes, yet people live even in darkness by feeling their way with their hands and feet. If all of us join together, the children will surely rise and stand.

In Tapesar's mind came the saying: as long as there is breath, there is hope. If the work could not be managed by them, they would call the doctor. But he too was not nearby. And if they wished to take the patient to him, that too was difficult. First, there was no proper transport; second, three people would have to be taken. Not only that, all of them too would have to go.

On one side, there was the uncertain state between life and death; on the other, the problem of arranging transport; and in his mind there was also the doubt whether, by the time they reached the doctor, she would still be alive. Like a thorn that, while being freed from one side, catches on the other, Tapesar's mind became entangled. No straight path appeared before his eyes. With a restless heart, Tapesar got up, went to the delivery room, and said to his mother:

"Ma..."

After "Ma", no other word came out of Tapesar's mouth. Seeing his restless mind, the palhain said:

"Baua, do not let your heart become so small. We shall do whatever lies within our power. We shall not let anyone's life go if we can help it. Since I put both children to the breast, they have settled a little. First of all, arrange milk. Right now they cannot digest buffalo's or cow's milk; buy a goat from somewhere. Until then, milk someone's goat and bring the milk. Many goats do not have enough milk even to feed their own young, but buy one that has only one kid."

Because of the period of ritual impurity after childbirth, the sixth-day ceremony of the twin brother and sister, Dheeraj and Ghurni, was not performed. There was no proper settling of the lying-in room, nor did anyone's mind ever become steady enough to think of what was auspicious or inauspicious. Of course, all three of them, the palhain, Sunayana and Tapesar, kept their minds fixed on the children all the time; yet sometimes, in an unguarded moment, each of them would think within: God has sent these two to recover some debt. However much of that debt remains, He will take it back before letting them go.

But the mind would turn at once and realise that even the Creator cannot alter fate and destiny. If both children had come to enjoy the happiness of this earth, they would live somehow, like stones lying in water, even without much nursing and care. Yet, apart from the children, all three had their own lives and their own worlds too.

What could the poor palhain do? On one side, she had ten households to attend; on the other, her own family and children; and above all, a husband given to drink. Give credit to the old woman: even on her dried and worn-out bones, neither her hands and feet ever trembled, nor did her mouth ever stay shut. Even now she carried the same authority: who knows how many days one is to live, a thousand, a hundred thousand, or perhaps not die at all? But Sugia, the palhain, listened all day to the good and bad words of her mother-in-law as if under a snake-charmer's spell, yet never answered back. Taking everything as her own, her mother-in-law, Jhinguri, like the mistress of the house, kept reviewing the work all the time: which task was urgent and how urgent it was. Whatever work became urgent, Sugia left the other work aside and took that up first. That is why she listened silently to her mother-in-law's words and stories.

Does that mean Jhinguri remained angry with her daughter-in-law all the time? No, how could she? Whenever Sugia brought from some courtyard a little pavanot, some cooked vegetable or sidha (food materials) and placed it before her, or even when, while sitting,

she stretched out her legs and began to work the grinding-stone, the same mother-in-law would bless her:

“May God give you my years too.”

That, indeed, is a family: one that keeps moving with happiness and sorrow, with good and bad, laughing and weeping, yet in its own ease and delight.

Jhinguri’s life too had taken a similar turn. After bearing a single child, she became a widow. She had no fields and farmland of her own, but she did have ancestral property, a share in half the village through the kinship line. From that, food and drink were never a problem; she even kept giving her son a little money for his food and drink. Let the son have become an addict, what of it? Even now, she had never asked him to lift a single straw. If a son does not enjoy comfort while his parents are alive, what value do parents have? Tying this thought into the knot of her heart, Jhinguri had never placed any burden upon her son until now. Let the son be spoilt by indulgence; a principle is still a principle. It has its own value, whether one acts by it or not. If it had no value, how would the son of a wise person turn into a fool?

Because she served many households, Sugia had to do so much work outside her own home that she remained worn out day and night. Morning and evening, night and day, there was always work. Somewhere it was time for grinding grain; somewhere there was a call for sowing. Give credit to Sugia: like a spinning wheel, she kept moving and managing work all the time. On top of that, she was, in effect, the mother of the motherless twins, Dheeraj and Ghurni. From feeding them milk to grinding and pounding grain, she had to stretch her body and hands for everything. Since she served so many homes, she had to keep her eyes and ears alert in all directions. The labour of life had seized Sugia in such a way that it did not let her look anywhere else.

Her mind would say: a woman whose own mother is alive can somehow look after her own little children as a wife and mother; but

who is there in this world to look after these two, Dheeraj and Ghurni? They were born through my hands. If I do not raise and nourish them, who will take responsibility for them? Who will be held guilty in God's court? Poor grandmother Sunayana is there, but at this age she has no milk. If the children are kept entirely on goat's milk, they will be weaned away from breast-milk too early. And will the chest of a child weaned too early ever grow strong?

Whether she had eaten or not, Sugia kept running about all day like a wild creature that feeds its young, holds them close, lays them down to sleep and then goes out to graze.

Middle-aged Sunayana, seeing the burden of sorrow upon her king-like son Tapesar, kept herself wholly gathered, day and night, towards lightening that burden. Just as, on a battlefield, a commander, seeing an enemy arrow coming towards his king, draws the right arrow from his quiver and tries until his last breath to stop it, so Sunayana tried to stop the arrows coming towards Tapesar. What a blow God had dealt him, trapping him in a crevice where He had never given men the skill to manage such work. Like the fields of Kosi-area, He had erased ridges and boundaries and filled everything with wild growth. Though she herself was a woman, even she would not be able to manage all the work that belonged to women, feeding milk to the children and everything else. If God had to set such a snare, He should have made it larger and taken both children along with their mother. Then the man's body, her son's body, would have remained free. If he wished, he could have kept the family like a bird's nest; if he did not, he could have taken a gourd and a water-pot and wandered through the world, living as he could. As long as she lived, a mother's affection would have held him. But even then, if the tenderness of wife, son and daughter awoke within him, his mind would still have wandered.

In a moment of unawareness, a thought rose in Sunayana's mind: however far the creeper of attachment and affection spreads, a human being cannot spread that far. A human being has limits. Within those limits, she was the mother of her Tapasiya. She would

do only as much as she could. Or should she become helpless in his sorrow and sit weeping? Whatever lay within a mother's duty, she would not be miserly there. Whose family belongs to whom? Does it belong to anyone at all? A man remains in the house, eats grain, drinks water. As long as one lives, one feels that everything is one's own; once the eyes close, one is lost in darkness.

Sunayana's mind turned again. While I am alive, can a creature of bone and skin bear to see tears in the eyes of her son? I am not a stone lying somewhere. A human being has within him a storehouse for walking, moving, thinking, reflecting, understanding and sensing; he moves by seeing and hearing. Let the world become dishonest if it must, but as I am Tapesar's mother, so shall Tapesar see me. I shall never let this thought rise in his mind that, along with the world, his mother too stepped back. I shall keep holding and managing Tapesar's family until it goes beyond control. If God wills and both these little creatures rise and stand, the family will surely bear fruit and blossom. Where has it gone beyond control yet? It can still be managed. Look, when the seeds of sajmain (Pumpkin) and jhungni (ridge gourd) are buried under the soil, they find their time, break open, come up and then spread from earth to sky. But these two children are above the soil. If proper care is given, they will surely grow into strong plants.

Between hope and despair, Sunayana's mind began to swing like Radha and Krishna on the kadamba tree of Vrindavan. She moved neither this way nor that. Her eyes stared out and began to look at the world. Just as a two-leaved or four-leaved sajmain or jhungni plant holds itself upright in the hope of becoming a creeper, while the person tending it fixes small twigs all around to protect it, so Sunayana sprang up and muttered:

"Needless guardians rise even to protect the cow's dharma."

In a father-centred family, after the father disappears, the family remains mother-centred until the son becomes father-like. In any case, in certain matters, motherhood remains the centre of the family. First, the raising of children is already considered the work of

the mother's side; on top of that, Tapesar had obeyed his mother's command until now, and so he was like a bow drawn by her hand. Yet, seeing the breaking family and the new entanglement, his mind began to grow confused.

For so many days he had been doing farming and fieldwork. Day and night he had remained engaged in that. Now that would no longer be possible. First, Mother's strength would lessen day by day. Second, for the children he would have to rear animals, from goat to cow. It would not happen by itself. However he managed it, feeding and watering, milking and straining, right up to keeping watch, all would have to be done. It would be difficult even to leave the animals tied to the post and go anywhere. From dogs and cats to bulls and calves, all would cause trouble. Oh! If nothing else worked, he would put the fields on sharecropping. If he did not do that, things would not remain manageable.

Six days short of six months. When it was time to go for grinding and pounding, Sugia hurriedly mixed fodder and chopped straw in the cow's trough and set out. As soon as she crossed the raised threshold, she saw a cat cross from left to right. Her mind began to turn upon omen and ill omen. If it had gone from right to left, that would have been inauspicious; but it had not. It had crossed from left to right. Taking it as a good omen, Sugia's mind filled with joy. But immediately reasoning began, and with reasoning came counter-reasoning, then too much reasoning and too much counter-reasoning. Her mind became unsettled. Is it not men who say that when a cat crosses from left to right, it is auspicious? But a man's right is a woman's left, and his left is a woman's right. Not finding an answer to the question, Sugia's mind came to a stop.

But then she thought: what is unknown and what is known, both may bring great good. The son who went to the plough went under the protection of gods and ancestors. Why am I getting entangled for nothing? If I knowingly buy a disease, whose fault will it be? Her mind became light. As soon as it became light, her gaze moved towards Dheeraj and Ghurni. She began to count the days

from their birth. Their birthday fell in the month of Paus (January). Counting on her fingers, she found that five months and twenty-four days had been completed. Six days short of six months. As soon as she added up the count, her mind grew sweet. Between sky and earth, her heart began to dance and sing. Had one more day passed, the twenty-ninth of Magh would have slipped out of the count, and now only six days were left for six months. Struggling and struggling, the children had almost become six months old. A child that remains in the mother's womb for less than six months does not open its eyes; but one born after six months comes with eyes like the eyes on Bhagwati's bel fruit. Only six days were short; surely the power of sight must have formed by now. Like the sheath of a flower, the petals must surely have come out.

Like a half-open flower, Sugia's mind fell between joy and sorrow. It was no longer like a peepal leaf, trembling all the time; it became more like the broad leaf of a banyan. Am I not the mother of these two children now? Their own grandmother, Sunayana, is like a ripe mango. Yet thanks must be given to her too, for along with the work of house and courtyard, she also looks after both children. And the brother, Tapesar, too, has left his man's work, the farming and fieldwork, and remains engaged all day in the work of house and courtyard. That poor man too deserves thanks for rearing such breast-fed infants. Even though I serve many households, am I doing any less? Sugia's mind grew calm. Her gaze turned towards God.

As soon as her gaze turned towards God, anger began to rise. They call Him God, the one who keeps the same eye on all. But let Him say why He gives some people so much that their weighing pan and cooking-pot become greasy, while others are uprooted like a tiny bamboo clump, crying and wailing to the very root. The age too has become such that as one sees the deeds of men, so one sees the deeds of women. Some throw living sons and daughters into the thorny fence; some make them lick salt. Then, at once, her mind turned back towards her own family and fell upon her addicted husband. As soon as her eyes fell upon her husband in thought, anger rose against her

mother-in-law and father-in-law. She muttered:

“The old woman, I mean my mother-in-law, had as much a hand in spoiling her son as the old man did. Lighting balls of ganja again and again, they made their son too a ganja-smoker like themselves. What can I do alone? From inside the house to outside, working and working, my body grows stiff.”

When Sugia reached Tapesar’s place, she saw Sunayana sitting near the children. Forgetting everything that had crossed her mind on the way, she smiled and said:

“Kaki, only six days are left for them to complete six months. Now both of them will surely see the world.”

Hearing the palhain’s words, Sunayana forgot everything of her own and gathered the children into her heart. Seeing the fruit of the grove Tapesar had planted, she was filled with wonder. Waves of joy began to rise in her mind. In the hearts of both mother and son, the tree of patience sprouted.

Until then Sunayana had leaned heavily upon the palhain; now she felt that this dependence could be reduced. The children had become almost six months old. Now, along with milk, they would also begin to taste grain. She would make lentil broth and feed them. But at once another thought rose in her mind: lentils too are of many kinds. They are not all the same. Some are easy to digest, some heavy. Each has its own nature, manner and quality. Her mind began to wander. Wandering and wandering, Sunayana’s eyes settled upon kherhi lentils. Their form itself suggested how easily they would cook and digest. It was not as though one would feed the children some heavy thing with roti. She said to the palhain:

“Daughter-in-law, kherhi lentils will be the best.”

The palhain said:

“Yes. As their bodies grow stronger, their food should be increased little by little. Now they will themselves begin to turn from side to side, press and push, and stretch their arms and legs.”

Sunayana did not even fully hear all that the palhain said. In the middle of it, her mind flew away to Tapesar's life. The poor man had had no happiness in the world. He had not even lived five years with his wife. Who knows what sin of which birth had borne such fruit for him? Then her mind turned back to herself and her husband. Perhaps the fruit of the good and bad deeds of parents also falls upon sons and daughters. As Sunayana's thoughts rose higher and higher, the colour of her face began to fade. Could it be that some sin done by us has rolled down upon the poor man? Then her mind moved ahead towards society. Had such a time of calamity fallen only upon Tapesar, or had it fallen upon others too?

Tapesar, sunk in grief, had his eyes fixed upon his declining household. Whatever grain and vegetables once came home from his own fields, after the fields were given on sharecropping, became little more than a small share; and even that came when it would, after others had sorted and chosen from it. But expenses had certainly increased. Leaving his own work and labour aside, he remained entangled all day in the work of the house and courtyard. And how could he leave it? Were these the young of sheep or goats, that they would come out of the womb and at once begin to jump and leap? A human child is like a palmyra tree; how much time it takes merely for its roots to hold! That is another matter, that the palmyra neither stops another nor stops itself.

When her chain of thought suddenly broke, Sunayana asked the palhain:

"Daughter-in-law, I did not understand what you said."

The palhain said:

"I was saying that now they can begin to manage many things themselves."

Hearing the words "manage many things", Sunayana saw the family dancing before her mind. She began to think: when the growth of people in a family itself comes to a halt, what use are wealth and property? Then the thought turned again. If God grants both of them

a long life, they will earn wealth and property. As soon as the thought of earning came into her mind, her gaze turned towards her own work. Faith awakened in her: when they were like tiny worms, we reared them; now they have almost become six months old. While I am alive, shall Tapesar weep? How can that be?

Then another thought rose in Sunayana's mind: I shall make a little garment for the grandson from the worn end of my old sari, and I shall sew a small ghaghri for the granddaughter. So what if age has advanced? As long as there is strength in the body, I shall keep working. When the strength breaks, then it will be understood. But shall I let my son weep? There is no one in the world to wipe his tears. If there is no one, why is Sugia doing so much? What concern does she have with my family? Yet she does have concern. The one who has love has everything in this world.

While examining both children, the palhain said:

"Now, even if goat's milk is not available, cow's milk will serve the purpose. The children will themselves begin trying to turn and roll on the bedding. Just help them turn gently with your hands. Anyway, I shall keep coming from time to time. Tell Bhaiya that tomorrow, after dressing them in silk, he should bring them out into the courtyard."

Lost in worry, Tapesar kept thinking his own thoughts while also listening to the conversation of the two women. He had a farmer's mind; therefore his mind ran more towards work than towards talk. The life he had lived until then had suddenly taken a turn. Like the chanting of a tulsi rosary of one hundred and eight beads, Tapesar's days and nights passed amidst the work of his household. Yet, just as the eyes cannot deny the faith of the heart, so his mother and the palhain sat firmly in Tapesar's heart. Therefore his worry was not as deep as it might otherwise have been.

While examining the two children, the palhain straightened their hands and feet, held them by the legs and swung them upside down, placed a mark of kajal on their foreheads, smiled, and said to

Sunayana:

"Kaki, shall we get Bhaiya married?"

Hearing the word "married", Sunayana entered a lake between happiness and sorrow, between good and bad, and began to think. How long can hope rest on me? I have reached the fourth stage of life; as long as I live, I live. But Tapesar's life is not like that. What has happened to him now? And what certainty is there about the children? Even the young and strong pass away. A human being is an unbaked clay vessel, and those two children are like still wetter clay. They have not yet dried properly. Let even the tiniest touch of some harmful thing fall upon them, and they will be gone at once. But a family moves forward through the union of man and woman. Until the two come together, how will creation move ahead? Avoiding the matter, Sunayana said:

"Daughter-in-law, what you say is good, but how can such a thing be spoken of within a year?"

Sugia's words had reached Tapesar's ears too. Within him, Tapesar's mind kept trying to speak, but his understanding stopped him. Yet, however much understanding restrained him, he ended up speaking:

"Daughter-in-law, you too have spoken for the good; I do not deny it. But only when both children rise, stand, and take steps towards the world! Even as it is, people consider them maituggar and do not let their sons and daughters come to this house. If I myself take a second wife, then no one will wish to send their son or daughter into the hands of a stepmother."

Hearing Tapesar's words, the palhain said:

"Bhaiya, there are many men like this in society. Society too has not taken it as evil; it has accepted it and made a path for it. Then why do you speak like this?"

At Sugia's words, Tapesar's mouth closed, and so did Sunayana's. In her mind, Sunayana began to think: a new bride, one who knows a little of the ways of the world, comes into a family

among mother-in-law, father-in-law, husband, elder brother-in-law, younger brother-in-law and sister-in-law. Like a tender twig, she takes the shape into which she is bent and formed. Why do people place blame on a stepmother? She too is human. If we push her away from the human path, how will she become human? Yet there are some human beings who do not wish to remain within the harness. Yes, but such a person is not only a stepmother; others too can be like that. Sunayana's mind became entangled, and she fell silent.

A thought rose in Tapesar's mind: what is life? If life is for living, then many kinds of means are needed for living. For family life, both man and woman are needed. If that is not there, how long will a family stand as a family? At present the two children are living on the hope of an old mother, while she herself needs someone to cook for her and serve her. If she too dies, then who will cook and feed us? Shall I arrange food, or shall I cook it? If there is no cooking, how will we eat? If we do not eat, how will we live? If human beings themselves do not remain alive, how will the family remain? Yet human beings are strange creatures. Some, while trying to put out the fire in their own house, burn themselves too; others laugh while setting fire to the house. But in our case it is not like that. Whatever happened may have happened unknowingly, but knowingly nothing has been done. The palhain's thought is not bad. The poor woman spoke only after looking at the faces of both children; she spoke with a feeling of her own. Where in her mind was it that a second woman must necessarily be wicked? She may even be a worthy person. Whatever it may be, there is certainly a need for people in a family. Mother may be managing now, but after she is gone, after her death, the need will surely arise.

Then another thought rose in his mind: what if, before Mother's own eyes, the daughter becomes old enough to cook? After marriage, she too will go to her in-laws. By that time there will be a daughter-in-law too.

A year passed. That year's Adra festival remained dull and broken. In Magh, such a dry, destructive wind had blown that not a

single mango tree blossomed. What to speak of children, even the grown-ups did not feel that the mango season had come. Just as there can be no wedding procession without the groom, what is Adra without mangoes? In village speech, a woman is called the mistress of a household only while the man is there; without him, she is reduced to a widow, a helpless woman. Towards the end of Jeth, there was not the true monsoon, but there was a strong shower. With the rain, the colour of the earth changed. Unlike other years, neither was the heat excessive nor was the form of the fields and groves spoilt. With green grass, the fields looked beautiful, as though dressed in a sari with the colour of a parrot's wing.

Because the season had turned early, genhari greens had sprouted on the western side of Sunayana's eastern house, on the raised strip behind it. In just twenty days, the plants had become as thick as fingers. They were fit to be transplanted, leaving a little root. Only the day before, after seeing the seedlings, Sunayana had decided that the next day she would transplant the greens. If planted now, they might be five days late, but the root would remain sound. Besides, it was not as though the western wind was blowing, that even one plant would droop after planting. She would give water in both evenings, and they would take root at once. If they wilted a little in the sun, they would rise and stand again in the coolness of the night. If she did not plant them now, there would be difficulty for vegetables in Bhadon (September). But then the thought of Bhadon greens came to her mind. She was still turning it over when another thought rose: it is poro and patua greens that are considered phlegm-producing in Bhadon; not all greens are the same. Just as mustard and tori are pungent in winter, and poro and patua in Chait and Baisakh, so genhari and thadhia are suited to Bhadon. Sunayana felt happy. As happiness came, the form of genhari flashed in her mind: leaves dressed in a green sari, the red border of the stalks running through them, spreading upon the earth and looking at the world with eyes of delight. Not only that, genhari and patua dedicate their lives to the service of others; even after their heads are cut again and again, they

grow new heads and signal again for service.

Just as a hen comes out of the coop with her chicks and wanders from the open threshing ground to the kitchen garden and bushes, teaching them to peck and letting them see the world, so Sunayana set out towards the west with both children, Dheeraj and Ghurni, carrying water in a lota. Reaching the raised strip, she stood and looked at the bed of genhari. At that very moment she remembered the gurmi seeds pasted and kept on the wall. Raising her eyes, she saw the shiny seeds. Seeing them, she remembered that the time had come to plant gurmi too. There were plenty of seeds; she would not plant all of them herself. She would give some to others as well. Gurmi was still in her mind when she looked towards both children. As the softness of gurmi entered her mind, the words came out of her mouth without her noticing:

"Baua, I shall plant the greens today, and tomorrow I shall plant the gurmi too."

Hearing his grandmother's words, Dheeraj said:

"Which gulmi?"

Pointing with her finger towards the gurmi seeds pasted on the wall, Sunayana said:

"Those are gurmi seeds. Just as you two, brother and sister, are children, so are they seeds. I shall dig the soil with a khurpi (hand trowel) and plant them. In five or six days the plants will sprout. Just as you two will become this big for me, so will they grow and begin to bear."

Hearing his grandmother's words, Ghurni began to whimper:

"I want gulmi. I want gulmi."

Paying no attention to Ghurni's whining, Sunayana sprinkled the water from the lota (water pot) on the greens. Seeing the water being sprinkled, Ghurni too fell silent. Putting the lota down, Sunayana looked closely at the plants and felt that not all the plants could be pulled out from one side. Otherwise, while pulling out the

bigger ones, she would disturb the smaller ones. After four days, the smaller ones too would be ready for transplanting. Then she remembered that she would plant them in about one and a half dhur nearby: four or five steps east to west and four or five steps north to south. She would plant them a span apart. Adding up the calculation in her mind, when she looked at the seedlings, it seemed that there would be fewer plants on all four sides. Well, God gives everything in such a way that one may eat oneself and also give to another.

Ghurni, put their hands on the same plant and tried to pull it out. Each tried to push the other's hand away. They caught hold of one another's hands and began to quarrel. Unable to stop their quarrel, Sunayana quickly pulled out the sturdier plants and said:

"Come, let us go. It is done."

The two children walked ahead, and Sunayana came behind them into the courtyard. Reaching the courtyard, she washed the roots of the plants in the water kept in a bowl and left them in the same bowl. She pulled out the grass that had grown in the place meant for planting, threw it aside, took the khurpi down from the verandah beam, and began to make small furrows a hand-span apart, striking the soil six times for each line. As soon as she had made ten or so furrows, the two children began to snatch the khurpi from her hand. Seeing that the work was being obstructed, Sunayana freed her hands from the children and threw the khurpi into the middle of the courtyard. She feared it might injure them. Both children ran to fetch it, and meanwhile she quickly took the plants from the bowl and began to plant them. The two children caught the khurpi and again began to snatch it from each other. Once more the fear rose in Sunayana that the khurpi might cut their hands. Having planted all ten furrows, she took the bucket and set off towards the hand-pump to bring water. The two children left the khurpi and ran after her. Bringing water, she began to pour it with the lota on the planted seedlings. Again both of them began to snatch the lota. She quickly filled it and gave it to them. Then both began to snatch the lota from each other. In the meantime she brought the khurpi and began to dig

another furrow. Looking at the two children, Sunayana became bewildered. Should she take the khurpi and dig the furrow, should she plant, or should she water?

Two and a half years passed. Both brother and sister, Dheeraj and Ghurni, learnt to speak from their grandmother and their father. Their speech too became clear. Proper words began to come from their mouths. When thirsty, they began to say "water", and when hungry, "rice" or "roti". They did not know, like city-bred children, how to talk on a mobile phone, play with toy knives and pistols, or burst small firecrackers; but they certainly began to live the life of village children. In the village household, the fate that usually befalls a widow and the helpless did not befall the family of the maituggar children, Dheeraj and Ghurni. Even so, in village society, the eyes of elders towards poor maituggar and bapatuggar children are often poisonous. Not only that, a widow is considered inauspicious like a witch, and the sorrow-stricken, the motherless and the fatherless are despised.

Carrying a bucket of water, Sunayana slipped at the hand-pump and fell. Her body was injured, but her head remained safe. Because of the blow against the brick, her right wrist broke. At first the injury did not seem very serious, but the wrist began to swell. Tapesar had gone to bring bamboo leaves. Sunayana spread bedding on the verandah and lay down there, helpless with one hand. Both children sat on the same bedding. When Tapesar returned with the leaves and saw his mother lying down, he asked:

"Ma, why are you lying down?"

Wiping her tears, Sunayana said:

"Baua, I fell at the hand-pump!"

Hearing the word "fell", Tapesar was startled and asked:

"Were you hurt?"

"I struck myself a little on the brick."

Coming close, Tapesar saw the swelling on her wrist and fell

silent. Judging from the swelling, it was most likely broken. His mind jolted; his heart cracked. Steadying himself, he said:

"I shall call the doctor. He will give medicine; it will get better."

Saying this, he went to the hand-pump, washed his hands and feet, put on his shirt, and left. As soon as he stepped out of the courtyard, a thought rose in his mind: as far as I can manage, I must do everything. There is no certainty in life; who knows what may happen when? I climb bamboo myself; if I fall from there, what will happen? Tapesar's worry began to grow.

Returning with the doctor, Tapesar said to his mother:

"Ma, tell Doctor Sahib everything exactly as it happened."

After listening to Sunayana, the doctor put a plaster on her wrist. He took his fee and left.

After giving water to the cow, Tapesar began to strip the bamboo leaves. The burden of work rose in his mind. Even otherwise, there is not a single moment's rest in day or night; on top of that, Mother's broken wrist has increased the work further. Who is there to leave it to? Feeding and watering the cow, doing the work of the house and outside, I cannot simply abandon it. First, Lakshmi stands lowing at the door; second, the cow is the children's mother in another form. What are they now? Only two or two and a half years old. If they do not get even a little milk, how will their chests grow strong? If it cannot be managed, then it cannot; but Mother too has now become like this. First there is old age, and if even a quarter-seer of milk is not available, how will the bones of old age hold together? Until now the two children had to be looked after; now Mother too must be looked after. The produce and the garden are in such a state that it has become difficult to manage. Because of the drought, the crisis has increased this year. From last month itself, grain has had to be bought. There is no other source of money. O God! What mistake did I make in which birth that this suffering is gathering upon the whole body like a skin disease? But will sorrow run away by

worrying?

Tapesar stripped the leaves and began to cut the fodder. He remembered the chopped bamboo leaves. I am feeding bamboo leaves to a milch cow. But what is the remedy? If there are not even two handfuls of green fodder, how will she eat chopped straw? If I go myself to bring grass, that takes so much time. Putting the fodder into the cow's trough, he came to his mother and said:

"Ma, do not worry. It was the fault of the day; it happened. What do you lack? You have a son like me and two grandchildren near you. Then what sorrow can you have?"

In a trembling voice Sunayana said:

"Baua, when I see your sorrow before my own eyes, my heart writhes. Whatever work I was able to help you with, even that now...!"

Hearing his mother's words, Tapesar was struck dumb. His speech stopped. The evening's sidha (food) came to his mind. The hour had slipped away. How would the hearth be lit at night? Who would sleep without eating? Whatever little money had been in hand had also gone into medicine and treatment. Never before had his hands become empty like this. Otherwise, would he have had to speak to Doctor Sahib like that over a mere fifty rupees? Silently, Tapesar's chest began to tremble. There was no support ahead, no tether behind. He said to his mother:

"Ma, without selling land, it has become difficult to pass even a single day. So..."

Hearing her son's words, Sunayana remained silent. A thought rose within her: the house and family are his. How can I say yes or no? What will be possible through me? Just as a whirl forms in the force of a current, Sunayana's mind began to whirl. When one coin is missing, a house sinks; when one coin is added, it rises. If one katha after another is sold, how long will it take to become landless? On one side are the expenses of the family, on the other the blows of time; and over that, as property decreases, income too will keep

decreasing. Seeing his mother silent, Tapesar said:

"I am going to talk about selling the chauri (water-filled) field."

Tapesar set out to speak about selling the field. As soon as he stepped out of the courtyard, a thought rose in his mind: even a decent buyer will offer less. It will be like a man fallen into a pit, whose straw too is snatched away by crows. But immediately Tapesar's own mind said to him:

"What fault is yours? People build a house by cutting down their wishes and their hunger, and a storm blows it away. What fault lies with the one who built it?"

Patience came to him as he moved his feet forward. The world is large. If God keeps one's hands and feet sound, life can somehow be managed. But I will not run away from the situation that stands before me today. To run would be cowardice. With what face shall I show myself to people? There are many people like me.

At once Tapesar's mind turned another way. Just as there are people of many occupations in a village, so a village too has many forms. To one person, the same village belongs to the learned; to another, it belongs to fools. To one it belongs to drunkards and gamblers; to another, to cheats and devils. But does that mean a tamarind will grow on a mango tree, or mangoes on a tamarind tree? Each has its own quality, nature and path. Some live a tattered life, and some live a comfortable one. That does not mean that the one who lives a tattered life necessarily becomes fallen. Yes, it does happen. But a person whose thought remains firm finds joy in shaping and living such a life. To attain joy is, after all, the purpose of life. Some spend their time in contemplation of truth, while others wander day and night in petty cunning. There have been such seekers of truth on this earth who, given life twice and thrice over, would still wish to go on contemplating. This limitless expanse can be known and searched only through hard labour.

As Tapesar reached the far edge of the hamlet, Khushilal, who

had come from Calcutta, asked him:

"Brother, where are you going?"

Hearing Khushilal's words, Tapesar stopped. Just as sweet words grow in a happy mind, so affectionate words grow in a sorrowful one. For a moment his lips tightened, his eyelashes trembled, and Tapesar stood blinking. He said:

"Baua, I am caught in calamity. Mother's bone has broken. I have had a plaster put on it; after a month the plaster will be cut. Until then, along with proper food and water, medicines and treatment too will continue. How much shall I say?"

Khushilal said:

"Bhaiya, I too am a son of this society. Whatever strength I have, I shall help with that. I have come from Calcutta after a year, carrying four or five thousand rupees. Take whatever money you need now; return it in six months without interest. Your work will be managed for the present, and with a little adjustment here and there, I too shall manage."

Hearing of money without interest, Tapesar's mind felt joy. But at once another thought rose: perhaps Khushilal had spoken in sudden emotion after hearing of my pain. Just because he has said it, should I act upon it? Once a disease enters the body, it slowly begins to spread. My condition is like that now. He is giving six months' time, but will the arrangement be made by then? Expenses will keep increasing day by day, while I see no source of income. How, then, can I take it? He said:

"Baua, take two kathas of field instead."

At the mention of land, Khushilal was startled. A thought rose within him: the poor man is already struck by calamity. On top of that, if I take his land, will his heart remain steady? And if his heart does not remain steady, will his grief not increase further? He said:

"Bhaiya...!"

As he said "Bhaiya", tears came into Khushilal's eyes. Wiping

them, he said:

"Instead of six months, return it after two or four years."

The offer of money without interest struck Tapesar's mind like lightning. The whole system of interest flashed before him, the very system on which the banks of the world stand and dance shamelessly, beautifying the gardens of the rich, of rule and of power. Because of it, national progress, meaning human welfare, has remained no more than a phrase on people's lips. And in society too, interest has divided people into two parts: those who pay interest and those who feed upon it. Bank interest may be lower, but within six months it turns into principal and begins to produce more interest. The lineage of interest has spread across the world. Society's own interest, however, moves in one direction. A moneylender's ledger may lie in a pile with the Gita and the Ramayana and, like the philosopher's stone, that ledger too may acquire the sanctity of scripture. Breaking all limits of give and take, it makes a man place his hand upon the Gita and the Ramayana at the very time when the borrower's homestead is being registered away.

At once Tapesar's mind returned to his own problem. Like an elder brother speaking to a younger one, he said to Khushilal:

"Baua, people live among people for this very reason, so that they may live together in happiness and sorrow. The condition of my family has become like a broken stair. Somehow, when I place one foot, the other step breaks. It has become difficult to move even one step forward. It feels as if flood, storm, stones and thunderbolts have all arrived together. I see no certainty in life. It has become like the boatman's pole in deep water, finding no bottom."

Without planning to say it, Khushilal's mouth uttered:

"Bhaiya, only people are of use to people."

Tapesar said:

"You have spoken well. But even among people, a gulf has formed. You have seven times more property than I have. Yet when God has given a life of sorrow, how far can one run from it? While

living, how can I close my eyes? But after finding you, my chest has grown wide like a winnowing tray. It feels as if an ant drowning in water has found the support of a straw. I have found a companion. But sorrow too is not easy. It is not seasonal; it lasts all twelve months. I shall tell you this also: when you earn through such hard labour, do not scatter money like dust. The field I am selling now, you take it. If I sell again, I shall give it to you. Even if I die, your sons and grandsons will say that this is such-and-such field. The poor man sold it in the service of his mother."

Hearing Tapesar's words, Khushilal's heart melted. Silently, he brought out a suitcase from the house. Opening it with a key, he took out all five thousand rupees, placed them before Tapesar and said:

"Bhaiya, till today I have neither cheated anyone of anything nor stolen even a single straw. Raising both hands, I say to God that just as He has carried me across till now, so He will carry me across in the future too."

Hearing Khushilal's thoughts, pure as Ganga water, the mouth of the granary in Tapesar's mind opened. He said:

"Baua, everyone knows that land is like a net. A net is made to trap. Your heart is like clean paper for a deed. On it, a story of love may be written, and a criminal one too. But I would not want even the slightest dirt to enter your mind. Look, because of land, everything happens, from lies and falsehood to deceit and devilry, beating, violence, cases and lawsuits. Someone takes a forced signature and commits fraud; someone writes false boundaries. Someone takes one person's thumb mark and grabs another person's land; someone breaks a boundary by force and joins it to his own. How much shall I say?"

Hearing these new words from Tapesar's mouth, Khushilal's mind began to sprout new shoots of life, as a crop sown in a prepared field sprouts and rises above the earth. Seeing such new shoots, as the earth feels the health of its womb, so Khushilal felt within his heart.

Overwhelmed, he said:

"Bhaiya, let the world be whatever it is; let fire break out, let stones fall, but a human being is responsible for his own life. On one branch of the same tree, a barren growth appears and remains barren; on another, there is only a small shoot. But that does not mean it has no power to bear fruit. It does bear fruit. Let anyone do anything. Just as until today there has been no transaction between us and we have lived like brothers and kinsmen, so shall we live as long as life remains. You are like an elder brother to me. Whatever you say, I am ready to do."

Hearing Khushilal's words, Tapesar's heart began to soften and swell like a ripened mango. He said:

"Baua, in our village there are four kinds of land: homestead and courtyard land, bhit, medium paddy land, and chaur. Though all are in the same village, the four have different prices. There is a reason too: yield and use. Homestead land is high, and therefore useful for building a house. Bhit lies on the boundary. A house may be built on it, but if no house is built, vegetables can be grown there and orchards can be planted. In medium paddy land, only grain grows. But because chaur is low land, its value is the least. The reason is that in heavy rain or flood, its crop is washed away and swept off. In chaur, neither the produce of water nor that of upland grows. Of course, if proper channels are opened and aquatic crops are grown there, it too will become as valuable as any other land. It too is earth; if shaped, it can become anything. But how much shall I say? I left home a long while ago; now I must go."

Holding both of Tapesar's arms, Khushilal seated him again and said:

"Bhaiya, by finding you I have received a great deal. Today I feel that I too am a person of society. Merely tying embankments at the boundary of the village will not do. It will happen only when everyone's happiness and sorrow come together, so that all become one and pass life together. How can you go empty-handed? Since so

much time has passed, let a little more pass. One task of yours will also be done."

Tapesar said:

"Baua, land is not grain and water, that its price can be settled by measuring and weighing. Its value comes from boundaries and strips. Transactions of all kinds of land keep taking place in society. In our village, chauri fields sell for fifteen hundred rupees a katha. I shall give two kathas; give me three thousand rupees."

Khushilal counted three thousand rupees and gave them to Tapesar. Taking the money, Tapesar set out. On the way, he began to calculate what the household needed most urgently. First, he would buy provisions for a month. Whatever remained, he would keep in hand. When the house itself is on fire, one never knows which spark will rise from where.

After a month had passed, the doctor cut the plaster from Sunayana's hand and said:

"Do not do heavy work. It is an old person's bone, so it will not join like a child's, but if you take care of it, it will become better."

Hearing the doctor's words, Sunayana thought: if I do no heavy work, how will life become weighty? In life, work of every kind comes, light and heavy. Yet it is only while living that one sees the world; once the eyes are closed, everything disappears. Somehow I have become old, true. But if I can live until my grandson and granddaughter become fit to live on their own, that too will be good.

From body to spirit, Sunayana began to shrink with grief. On one side, her heart ached at her son's suffering; on another, she groaned on seeing the life of her motherless grandson and granddaughter; on a third, she watched the field she had cared for all her life, fed with ash and cow-dung, slipping away; on a fourth, she was tormented by the pain of her own body. True, the hope of living still awakened some enthusiasm in her mind; yet, as thick darkness surrounds and surrounds the light of a small lamp until it grows tiny, so it happened with Sunayana. She could see nothing in the world

except darkness. As though a falling life had pressed down a rising life and made it its mount, Sunayana took to her bed. However much her strength tried to raise her, she could not sit up for long. Lying on the bed, she spent the day going over the works she had done in earlier times. Whenever Tapesar returned from somewhere and asked, “Ma, how does your heart feel?”, Sunayana’s mind grew tasteless, like a fruit or vegetable that has quality within it but no flavour, no juice. Growing more and more tasteless, she died.

Three days after Phagua, the Chaiti rain came. It was untimely rain, yet the colour of the season grew greener. The little heat that had begun to bring sweat at midday suddenly stopped. The arrangements for the hearth fire, which had begun to be put away, were renewed. Quilts, padded covers and wraps kept in the house were taken out again.

With the first rain, everyone’s house leaked. The thatch, which had been soaked through the winter and then struck by four days of sun, had cracked into little splits like cracked heels. Because of that, it leaked well in the rain. There was another reason for the leaking. Looking for insects in the thatch, birds had pecked it so much that it was like children in chaur fields uprooting wild kesaur for no reason. Holes had formed in the roofs. Yet because it was the first rain, no one’s face grew pale. Everyone knew that this is how it has always been in the first rain. But just as the year begins with the month of Chait, so the rains too began with Chait itself.

After the first rain, everyone thought that as soon as the tied bundles of straw and thatching grass dried, they would re-thatch the houses. But did that happen? On the very next day after the first rain, it rained again. It did not merely rain again; it kept repeating. One day it rained, one day it paused. The straw and thatching grass that had been tied in bundles in the months of Paus, Magh and Phagun, with the intention of using them in Chait, Baisakh and Jeth, began to soak and rot in the stacks. Just as, once the edge of a stream breaks, it gradually becomes the main current, so, by leaking and leaking, everyone’s house turned into a place of dripping water. The thatch,

the bamboo slips and the corner bindings of the roof began to rot and fall. In the same way, the mud of the walls began to wash away and fall off. The houses turned into mud and sludge. As soon as it began to rain, some people bailed water out of the house with plates and bowls; others cut away and removed with spades the mud that had fallen from the walls. The food people ate became difficult to digest.

Seeing the condition of his house and his family caught in misfortune, Tapesar would remember God again and again and say within:

"O God, take me to Your own country. Why are You dragging me through hell?"

But merely saying this does not make it happen; there must also be someone to take one away. Seeing the road ahead closed, Tapesar would turn back and look, and his weeping mind would cry out: the sins of another birth torment people, but I cannot even remember the sin of my previous birth. Defeated and exhausted, the poor man, like a traveller walking in darkness, closed his eyes and moved forward step by cautious step. The year passed. Everyone's life was saved, but the house they lived in was no longer a house fit to live in.

Time slipped by like the water of a stream. The brother and sister, Dheeraj and Ghurni, turned five. Both began to do small household tasks and to pluck bathua greens from the field and bring them home. In the mango season, they began to gather fallen mangoes from the orchard for chutney. The fear that Tapesar had once felt for the two children, as one fears that crows may pull out and eat the tender sprouts of wheat and gram, no longer remained. Seeing the bodies of the brother and sister grow firm, like vessels or idols made of wet clay hardening in the sun, Tapesar's heart began to feel joy. Though they had no mother, both had risen and stood on their feet. Now they could even make a living by grazing someone's cows and buffaloes. Somehow or other, they would live. They would surely see the world. And even if the stigma of being maituggar clung to them, would their marriages not take place? They certainly would.

Just as his son and daughter were maituggar, many others in the world must be the same.

Seeing his burden grow lighter, Tapesar's mind turned towards the lives of his son and daughter. They were now fit to go to school. The times were changing. An age was coming in which who would care for an unlettered person? No, he would certainly have both their names entered in school.

As soon as school came to his mind, Tapesar's eyes turned towards clothes, slates and pencils. Well, whatever happened, he would have their names entered on Thursday. Counting the days on his fingers, he found that Thursday came on the third day. The day after tomorrow, he would get their names written; in the meantime he would buy clothes, slates and pencils for them.

The next morning, Tapesar made roti and mashed potatoes. The three of them ate and set out for the market. The market was only two kos away. Walking slowly and resting on the way, they would return by evening. He would not walk at his own pace but at theirs. After all, children have new feet; they would go along jumping and skipping. If they felt hungry, he would buy muri-kachari for them. He too would eat a little. At least one task would be done.

Reaching the market, he bought for the brother and sister one pair of trousers each, one vest each, one shirt each, one slate each, and a whole box of pencils. Then the three returned.

Before sunrise, Tapesar got up and arranged the morning meal. It was the season of the early morning school. Having their names entered at noon would not be good. If he got their names entered now, they would also begin going to study at the proper time.

With the son and daughter becoming helpers, Tapesar's life grew lighter. Ghurni began sweeping the courtyard, plastering the hearth and its surroundings, and washing plates and lotas. Seeing the household work becoming thinner, Tapesar thought that he would farm with his own hands. With the change in time, new tools had also come into farming. Because of them, yield had increased and labour

had become lighter. Where earlier people, using three or four leather buckets at a time, watered six or eight kathas of field in a whole day, there a pump-set and borewell now watered four kathas in an hour. In the same way, ploughing fields with a tractor and threshing wheat and paddy with a thresher had also become easier.

More than a quarter of Tapesar's land had already been sold, yet a thought came to him: whatever land remained, if he farmed it in the new way, the yield would be many times more than before. Just as new tools had been made, new kinds of seeds too had been made. Paddy that once yielded from half a maund to one maund per katha now began to yield a quintal per katha. The more Tapesar turned his gaze towards the future, the more a sharp light of hope began to appear before his eyes. But the problems too were dense. The fields were scattered across low and high land in uneven patches; on top of that came the trouble of cattle, wild animals, birds, small creatures and rats; and also the mischief of thieves secretly cutting crops and people stealthily grazing cows and buffaloes. Seeing such entanglements, Tapesar's mind stopped.

Just as a person loses his way in a dense forest and finds no courage to move in any direction, though without getting out there is no chance of saving his life, so it was with Tapesar. His entangled mind began to look for companions and support. Companions certainly existed, but of two kinds. The first were those who understood one path of life and saw their own welfare in it. The second were those who fired their gun from another's shoulder.

Thinking and reflecting, Tapesar's eyes settled upon three kinds of support. The first was the support of society, that is, of the villagers; the second was the bank; and the third was government help. In society, caste and community had spread in such a way that anyone's welfare had become difficult. Everyone moved to his own rhythm, out of rhythm with others. No one liked another; no one wished to see another's good. The bank was similar. In taking a loan even at fair interest, the running about and the expenses became so much that a person's heart broke. Government help was only for

show. Just as parents silence a crying child by tempting it with heap after heap of promises, such was the condition of government grants.

Tapesar became entangled again. The question rose: what should be done? I too have two kinds of capital. The first is labour, the second is wealth. There is no cash. But there is land. Just as I sold land to serve Mother and to rear and raise both children, I shall sell some more. If a little land decreases, the yield will increase that much more.

From the village school, Dheeraj and Ghurni both passed out. At the age of ten, both children began to help their father not only in the work of house and courtyard but also in the work outside. For the moment, there was no hope of further study. The lower primary school was in the village, but the school beyond the middle level was two kos away. To walk four kos (miles) every day for study was difficult, so their schooling came to an end.

Tapesar changed the shape of his household economy. He consolidated the scattered fields by exchanging and adjusting plots. Along with this, by selling a little land, he bought a borewell, a pump-set and a pair of bullocks. With water now in his own hands, he began farming throughout the year. Farmers, however, considered the four months of the rains the backbone of agriculture. If there was too much rain or flood, the crop was destroyed. If there was too little rain, there was drought.

It was ten o'clock. Bringing four maize cobs from the field, Tapesar called his daughter from the raised threshold:

"Buchchi, roast all four cobs. You brother and sister take two, and bring two to the dalan (out house)."

Laughing, Ghurni said to Dheeraj:

"Brother, look what fine maize it is. Sweets too are made from maize like this."

Giving the maize cobs to Ghurni, Tapesar sat leaning against the pillar of the verandah at the darwajja and began thinking about his life. The stomach had found its means. But like the stomach, there

was also the house. True, the family was not very large now. Yet to live, a house was needed. And this was the family of a householder. The borewell was fixed in the field, but a house was needed to keep the pump-set. If that was not done, it would get wet in the rains, and many parts would be damaged. Besides, if it was kept outside, thieves too might steal it. Were thieves now like those of earlier times, who stole sugarcane or firewood? Now they would steal things such as pump-sets, tractors and threshers. In the same way, a shed was needed for the bullocks too. The son and daughter had grown bigger. As workers in the house increased, work too had to be increased. Whatever work was connected with the field, it would be good to increase that. Now he would buy only two cows. The earlier one had grown old. She could no longer be kept profitably. He would not cultivate grain alone; he would also cultivate vegetables and fruits. What was cheap now? On Jitiya, marua flour sold for fifty rupees, and on Narak Nivaran Chaturdashi, sweet potato and suthni sold for forty rupees. Near the borewell too, the engine water fell and gathered, because of which nothing grew in about a katha of land. If mothi were planted there, it would grow; but do people now sleep on mothi bedding? Plastic had become such a companion of life that it stayed with people day and night. Better than that, he would dig even a katha and rear fish. If there were not enough to sell, there would certainly be enough to eat. When I work so hard, if I do not live with good food and a good house, what shall I do with money?

Closing his eyes, Tapesar began to think of the future and then of the past. Just then Ghurni came with the two roasted maize cobs and said:

"Babu, Babu..."

Startled, Tapesar opened his eyes and said:

"Yes?"

Seeing the maize cobs in her hand, he asked:

"Have you rubbed salt and oil on them?"

Ghurni said: "Yes."

Just then, Chetanath, walking from north to south, came and stood in front of the darwajja. Tapesar was holding the cob in his hand and looking at it closely when his eyes moved and fell upon Chetanath. Seeing Chetanath standing there, he said:

"Why are you standing? Whom do you need?"

Hearing Tapesar's words, Chetanath said nothing and moved slowly towards the darwajja. Seeing him come near, Tapesar rose to his feet with both cobs in his hands, wiped his eyes with the finger of his left hand, looked again, and shivered. Hair on his head like pale gold, beard and moustache tangled, the bones of the body sharp and visible, a toothless mouth, and clothes on his dirt-blackened body hardened with filth.

Without thinking, the words came out of Tapesar's mouth:

"Will you drink a mouthful of water?"

At the sound of water, a thought rose in Chetanath's mind. All his life he had served the Supreme Being; in his final state, how could he eat or drink without the fruit of service? True, the wind in his stomach, burning with hunger, urged him again and again to calm it. But his mind, tempered by a lifetime's austerity, was not ready to agree. Chetanath asked Tapesar:

"Who all are there in the family?"

Hearing Chetanath's question, Tapesar's mind stopped. Seeing him fall silent, Chetanath asked again:

"Why have you fallen silent?"

As, in the season of leaf-fall, the head of some pitcher-like bud on a tree tries to keep its existence alive between sorrow and happiness, so it happened in Tapesar's mind. Blinking faintly, he said:

"My mother and father are dead, and my wife too has died. There is only myself and two children."

Ghurni was standing nearby. Dheeraj was in the courtyard eating maize. Chetanath said: "Call both children."

Pointing towards Ghurni, Tapesar said: “One is here, and the other is in the courtyard.”

Saying this, he called Dheeraj. Seeing both children, Chetanath said: “I can drink water on one condition.”

Tapesar asked:

“What?”

Chetanath said:

“If you give me the work of teaching both children the art of music. All my life I have earned and eaten; at the time of death, I shall not commit such a wrong against my dharma.”

Finding his own thought mirrored there, Tapesar became happy. His heart overflowed with delight. A tickling joy rose in his belly. Laughing aloud, he said:

“Your condition is accepted with joy. First, go and drink water.”

Seeing a ray of hope rise in his crumbling life, Chetanath smiled and said:

“Yes, now I shall not only drink water, I shall also eat.”

Both men ate one roasted maize cob each, drank water, and began to talk.

Chetanath said:

“From today itself I shall begin teaching both children.”

Tapesar said:

“Leave today. It is the last day of their tenth year. Tomorrow they enter the eleventh. On the occasion of their eleventh birthday, I shall feed ten people from society and begin their studies too. In the meantime, tell me something of your own life.”

Hearing Tapesar’s words, Chetanath was astonished. Until today, no one had asked him the question that he would now have to answer. For a moment he remained silent, looked over his whole life, and began to speak: “My parents died long ago. My wife too died. I

had no children. I am alone. Until five years ago I never felt alone. But what has happened in these five years cannot be told easily."

Tapesar asked:

"What happened?"

Chetanath said:

"I shall speak from the day I came to my senses. Among four brothers and sisters, I was the youngest. I was my mother's great darling. From the age of eight or nine itself, my mind began to turn towards dance, spectacle, kirtan and bhajan. There was a dance troupe in the village and a bhajan troupe too. Every Tuesday evening, kirtan was held at the Mahavirji shrine. Along with our own village, the troupe would go to other villages too for ashtajam and dance. Making excuses, I too began to go with them. From there I would return having learnt a line or two, and I would sing it all day. I wished to make a khanjari (a musical instrument played by hand). I cut the rim of a broken earthen pot with a sickle, put bel gum on it, pasted paper over it, and made a khanjari."

Laughing, Dheeraj asked:

"Would a paper khanjari sound too?"

Hearing Dheeraj's question, Chetanath did not grow angry; rather, carried along in a flood of affection, he said:

"It sounded very well. And the work was not very difficult either. Just as bel was found here and there, so too was the wrapping paper from shop packets. I would quickly make another."

Dheeraj began to smile. Looking towards Tapesar, Chetanath continued:

"Singing and playing, my hands settled on the instruments and my speech too became fluent. A Ramleela troupe came to the village. I would eat at home and then spend the whole day and night near them. When they began to leave, I held on and went with them. I learnt to play instruments and also began acting in parts. My voice was as melodious as my hand on the harmonium was good. One day

Thikadas saw me. He was a singer in the royal court. He took me with him. I too became a court singer. When the royal order collapsed, I returned to the village. For some days I went from village to village for festivals. That too decreased. From that day, my condition went on worsening day by day.” ❑

Shambhudas

☰

Shambhudas had reached that frontier of life where many thoughts and actions from the past had fallen away of their own accord. Whatever new desire still stirred within him, the strength and capacity needed to fulfil it could no longer be found. Like sparks of fire slowly dying out, he seemed either to be covered with ash or to be falling away flake by flake. Like a lotus broken from its stem in a pond, his heart trembled at the faintest touch of wind or ripple of water. The man who had once been like Kamadhenu, like a tree laden with flowers and fruit, now appeared like a dry cow or a leafless stump. Shambhudas, who had once passed his days amid royal comforts, now sat at the ghat of beggary, deprived of food and clothing, adding up the account of his life.

His mind said to him: all my life I kept humming. A child comes weeping upon this earth and ought to leave it smiling. But where did that happen? The soul that crossed a life without discernment and reached the threshold of wisdom, why is it now stumbling backwards instead of moving ahead? With a beard and moustache white and bright as gold, hair from head to toe, cheeks dried like slices of sour mango, hands and feet drained of strength, yet with the light of his eyes red and alive like the morning Dhruva star, his heart overflowed with the desire to make three reverent circumambulations of this world as of a sacred shrine.

As on a fallow stretch of field and grove where no plough or

spade has ever passed, trees and plants dry up, fall, and turn the land barren; yet upon that same fallow land, through birds and tiny creatures, or through wind and water, wild trees of flower and fruit spring up, bear sun and storm, water and stone, tempest and gale, reach their youth, and with open chest satisfy travellers on the road with the fragrance of their flowers or the sweetness of their fruit; so Shambhudas was born on the bank of the Jamuna into a family of sharecropping peasants. Because it was a Sunday, the women of the community considered it an auspicious day and named him Shambhu. It was not like the way it happens with people living away from home, where parents choose a name even before the child is born.

Before the sixth day, forgetting all her pains, Shambhu's mother, Sukhni, gave up the ease of her own life and lost herself in worship of the deity at the sacred place. Holding firmly to her dignity, she devoted herself to Shambhu's care. His father stood under the burden of the family, and therefore could not think of anything apart from it.

Until five years earlier, Santokhidas and Sukhni had been agricultural labourers. Farming too is a toy in the hands of the seasons, and therefore uncertain. Even so, everyone knew that winter, summer and the rains are the three states of the year. In one year, the cold wave may give winter its terrifying form; in another, drought may give summer its cruelty; and likewise, with rain, the monsoon may dance naked with flood, and with storm it may perform its tandava.

The wind of the market stirred and rose like a gale, but the barriers of hills and forests could only slow it a little, not stop it. It kept blowing. Farmers and labourers battered by winter and drought left the villages and set out towards the markets. Just as building a house needs posts from thin to thick, running a factory needed workers as well as managers. A change began to come in the inclination of uprooted and unsettled villages. Field labourers began to find new wages in factories, and some greenness began to enter their lives. But the speed of the wind slowly increased. Finding cheap

labour, many-coloured trades and industries began to arise in the towns, and the demand for workers increased. Helpless labourers, weary of the breaking life of the village, began to move in groups towards the market. The trade in the sale of labour gained force. Buying and selling began openly.

With the flight of village labourers, the village too was shaken. When cultivators went to the factories, farming came to a halt; in the absence of labourers, cultivation stood still. The current of thought in society changed. One current, which still regarded property as prestige, kept the old farming alive by feeding it a little grain and water. The other current, seeing urban trade, began to regard fields and rural property as capital and brought a change in thought by calculating income and expenditure. Along with this, new problems also arose within sharecropping.

Where, until then, the village landowner saw his fields only at harvest time, once he went outside the village, he remained away from the sight of his fields year after year. At the same time, the labour force within the village decreased. The class of sharecroppers grew. The sharecropping system changed. This brought changes in the reckoning of produce, in the consumption of grain, and in the keeping of domestic cattle. Somehow, Santokhidas bought one bullock. With the hands and feet of the two of them, and with one bullock, Santokhidas stood up as a sharecropping farmer. With the family's stomach filled, there was not a flood of happiness, but happiness did come like irrigation water. Santokhidas became the cultivator of about one bigha of land.

With the new economic development, the wasting and early death of children began to decline. Children no longer wasted away as before, and child mortality declined. Even now, in labouring families, no difference was understood between sons and daughters, because no one wished to interfere in God's unfathomable play. Yet the poisoned wind of the market was certainly blowing.

As soon as Shambhu completed three years, hope awakened in Santokhidas and Sukhni, just as, in a cold wave, at the breaking of

dawn, hope rises for the sun's light, and in cloudy weather, as soon as the clouds scatter, hope rises for stepping out of the house. Since they had received enough field to feed the family, how could hope not enter the minds of the two of them? And there was no debt from years of flood or drought, only the debt of ordinary times. And what was such a debt? Would it have to be earned from somewhere else and brought home? Mother Earth was Kamadhenu. The more one worked, the more one would receive. Whenever the heart desired, they would eat, and day and night they would lie down in ease.

Until now, Sukhni could not step out of the courtyard because of Shambhu, but now Shambhu was three years old. In the month of Aghan, she would make a little hut of paddy straw for him on the ridge of the field. He would play in it, and if he felt sleepy, he would sleep there too. In the summer months, he would remain under the shade of trees. Only the rains remained. But does rain come without warning people? Before coming, it sends word like kings and princes. It even tells in what form it will come. If in the early Jeth rain the body is washed even twice, it will remain washed throughout the year. Is a child some cunning grown-up that it will keep running about all day? Give it food and water, and it will wander all day. As new teeth make the gums itch to do something, so it is with a child's mind too.

It was Jeth Dussehra. A Thursday. The work of the household had thinned. Mango and jamun trees were heavily laden with fruit. The minds of people from village to village were full. Why would they not be full? For two months they would receive fruit like nectar. The sky over the four-sided villages of the fields rang with the mantras of Ashtayam kirtan. Somewhere there was "Sitaram, Sitaram, Sitaram Jai Sitaram"; somewhere "Kali Durge Radhe Shyam, Gauri Shankar Sitaram". Somewhere there was "Hare Ram, Hare Ram..."; somewhere "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna".

Because it was Dussehra, horses were offered and decorated at the Barham shrine. This year, as Barham Baba was pleased, so too were the minds of the people. Would people, as in other years, offer

light, low-priced, thin-necked horses? No. First they would offer a hundred and fifty hand-fans, and then better horses, and then offer better horses than the mustard-coloured ones. Barham Baba's mind too must have become tired of eating milk and pitha; therefore this year migrants would offer mungwa of one seer, five seers, ten seers, half a maund and even a whole maund.

It was about eleven in the day. The earth and water were heated, and the air too was heated. If the straw and leaves lying in the field did not dry in Rohini and Mrigashira, would their dampness dry at all through the year? Therefore Santokhidas went to plough the marua field and Sukhni went to gather the straw. But how could they leave little Shambhu alone in the courtyard? For Shambhu, Sukhni took rice in a bowl and a full bucket of water to the field. She thought they too might feel thirsty, and so kept water for them as well. About two kathas away from the field, on the ridge, stood a hard-stemmed wild karai plant. There was not dense shade under it, but there was shade. Leaving Shambhu there to play, the two of them, Santokhidas and Sukhni, began working in the field.

Seeing that the work was nearly done and only the last rough levelling remained, Santokhidas unyoked the plough, propped it against the levelled ground, and said to his wife:

"Your mind must have become scorched in the sun. Come, let us rest in the shade for a while."

Sukhni at once said in the same tone:

"That is exactly what I wanted to say, but seeing the work so close to being finished, I did not speak. A work that begins to slip out of the hands feels lighter to the soul, does it not?"

"Yes, that is true. But work too..."

"What about work?" Sukhni asked.

Giving his wife a sidelong glance, Santokhidas smiled and said: "Just as bhang and ganja drive their servants mad, and a prostitute drives her lover mad, so work too makes its doer restless and seems determined to take his life."

“I did not understand.”

“Do you not see, it is written and hung in shops: keep doing your work, do not hope for the fruit. When we are human beings, and milestones are planted on roads to measure the way, then one has to think which road should be taken and where. Otherwise even the road may turn ghostly. It is only on a road one has not seen that a person loses his way. Anyway, leave all this. Come, let us cool ourselves a little, drink two mouthfuls of water, and take some tobacco.”

The two of them, Santokhidas and Sukhni, looked from a distance towards the wild karai plant and saw Shambhu, facing the eastern bank, singing the mantra of the Ashtayam:

“Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare.”

He was clapping in one rhythm like the drummer of Chhath.

As soon as her eyes fell on her son, Sukhni smiled like a half-open flower and said to her husband:

“Look at this boy. If other children were here, they would be crying ‘Ma, Ma’. See how absorbed he is!”

Hearing his wife’s words, Santokhidas said:

“He has not become overheated in the sun, has he?”

Sukhni said:

“Would an overheated child sing and clap, or would he be gasping and rolling?”

Santokhidas nodded and said:

“Yes, that is true.”

As a seeker of truth joins the string of the soul in search of Brahman, so Shambhu had joined the string of his mind to the Krishna mantra and was singing, lost in the tune of the Ashtayam, like Meera in ecstasy. Just as, in the same flower garden or orchard, flowers and fruits of different colours remain hidden from their own identity so long as they are raised and nourished like children, but once they become capable of showing their own quality and form, they begin to stand apart even while remaining in the same place; so,

by the time he approached six, Shambhu too began to stand apart. Though there were many kinds of things in the family, he kept attachment only to the extent that he understood a thing to be useful. A thing whose purpose and different forms others used in different tasks, he began to use in his own way according to his own need.

Though Santokhidas's family had no fields of its own, it had already entered the line of village peasant families. Just as a peasant family eats by stretching and measuring things according to season and need, so it began to happen in Santokhidas's family too. Of course, this condition could not continue steadily, because a peasant family keeps rising and sinking like a small boat. In a year of straw-burning drought or disastrous flood, everything would be washed and wiped away. But in a favourable year, it would again take up its old-new rhythm. The mingling of old and new is itself full of juice and taste; walking by looking both ahead and behind gives direction. The same mango is good fresh as chutney, but better when aged as pickle. The older the pickle, the richer its taste. But chutney dries up at once. So too with new kurthi lentils and old rahar dal.

Until now, Shambhu understood family only as eating, drinking and living with his parents. Taking him to be a child, neither did his parents press him to do anything, nor did Shambhu consider the work of the family his own work. He was always like a drawn bow, like a complete vairagi. But did that mean Shambhu lay stretched on the bedding all day? No, that was not so. If one does nothing at all, how do day and night pass?

Even now, village farmers remember everything from earth to sky at morning and evening. In the morning, they remember the earth; in the evening, they move through the sky in thought. Santokhidas's family was like other families. Shambhu had no special importance in the family. Only at the time of eating, drinking and sleeping did his parents lift him to their head with affection. The rest of the time, Shambhu wandered and strayed about idly like a young bull. Did that mean Shambhu needed a rope and peg like a horned and tailed animal? No. There is no need to appoint keepers for a stray cow.

In the morning, when Santokhidas began to think of the fields and farming, the tremor of anklets from his dancing heart would become the sound of his lips and fall, leaping and crackling, like popped grains of maize and jowar. With the many-coloured seasons, seasonal affection too would scatter. Shambhu would pick it up piece by piece, play with it, and now and then write it in the diary of his chest; he would also take it into his heart. But since it was a child's diary, some things would be written and some would remain unwritten. Yet the morning and evening sounds, "Sitaram-Sitaram", "Radheshyam-Radheshyam", were written on the upper pages of that diary. All day, Shambhu began to turn them into a gomukhi rosary of rudraksha and chant them. Like the cow Kamadhenu, from whose flow of milk new ragas and raginis arise by themselves, new melodies began to rise within him. The waves of his throat's voice began to make his hands tremble into rhythm. Sometimes he kept time with both empty hands, and sometimes, sitting cross-legged, he struck rhythm upon his knees.

Because house and courtyard were one, Shambhu began to dance and sing while following his father and also while following his mother as she swept the courtyard, plastered the hearth and its surroundings, worked the grinding-stone and the dheki. Seeing her son's wandering, enchanted mind, his mother too became absorbed in herself; swaying and swaying, she would fix her eyes into Shambhu's eyes and lose herself in a flower garden bursting into bloom.

Seeing the hands of his parents rise and move, Shambhu's own hands too began to rise over the bowl from which he ate. He started playing it like a khanjari, a musical instrument played by hand. How could he not? Does not work move through Ram and Ram through work? But because the bowl was made of heavy metal, how long could fingers of flesh and bone endure the beating? Shambhu could not understand this, but Santokhidas understood. He thought that if he made him a khanjari, Shambhu would remain immersed in joy all twenty-four hours. What, after all, is a father's duty towards his son?

Is it not that the child's days and nights should pass in laughter and happiness?

His mind accepted it: he would make a khanjari for his son. Like Ekalavya, Shambhu would have in the instrument a companion of his own. He would need no other companion, and he would never feel alone. Just as diseases flying in the air catch hold of people, just as the marriage season catches hold of bridegroom and bride, just as the cord of pilgrimage and vows takes hold, so song and sound, the raga of music, caught hold of Shambhu. It caught the humming of his father while ploughing, wielding the spade and transplanting paddy, and it caught the humming of his mother while sweeping the courtyard, husking paddy and turning the grinding-stone. With these, Shambhu, absorbed all day, wandered and moved about, making his own pairs and patterns of rhythm.

But did Shambhu remain entangled only in this? No. Neither the other houses of the village seemed unknown to him, nor did people appear strange. And since everything was close by, when he went towards fields and groves with his parents, he saw the same houses and the same people. Society is such a pond in which everything blossoms, from snails and small shells to the lotus. At the sacred place, morning and evening, the sounds of bell, gong and conch rose; in the threshing floor, the sound of winnowing baskets tossing paddy flew into the sky; axes and hatchets rolling over wood made a dull thud; and the pot set upon the hearth kept sounding its boiling "jha-jha-kali".

For his six-year-old son, Santokhidas thought of arranging a khanjari. Of course, khanjaris were not sold in the local market, but they were certainly sold at Hariharkshetra, Singeshwar, Janakpur and Deoghar. But how would one come from there? At present there was no plan of going that way. Still, in the village itself, carpenters made wooden frames. People killed monitor lizards as large as mustard-oil gourds and even ate their flesh; they also sold the skin. If he had a wooden frame made and bought monitor-lizard skin, he could cover it himself with gram-flour paste. Were they town or market people,

that they would give sons and daughters pistols, bombs, gunpowder or toy crackers to play with? If he had seen Shambhu's mind turning towards fields and threshing floors, he would have given him a blunt sickle or khurpi to play with. But he did not see that. Therefore he would arrange a khanjari for him. And that is what he did.

Just as a labourer, with tools in his hands, makes and runs large engines, so Shambhu, with a khanjari in his hand, began to take part with his family in the kirtan, bhajan, yajna and other gatherings of society.

By the time he completed seven years, Shambhu's hand had settled upon the khanjari. Sitting alone on the verandah of the courtyard, he would go on singing in one rhythm, Sita-Ram, Sita-Ram, Radheshyam, Radheshyam, matching the sound of the khanjari with the sound of his throat, until his fingers began to ache.

God's play is strange. Among human beings, animals and birds alike, He makes some children more than their age and some less. Some gather the understanding and wisdom of fifteen years by the age of five, while some, even at fifteen, remain below five. Something like this happened with Shambhu too. At seven, he began to outdo fifteen-year-old boys. And this was a school of society in which whoever worked harder surely received that much fruit.

At all times, somewhere or the other, some festival keeps taking place in society. From the sacred place to the family courtyard, somewhere there is Ashtayam-kirtan, somewhere a child's first tonsure, somewhere the worship of Satyanarayan Bhagwan, somewhere a wedding or the ceremonial return of the bride. Since these are auspicious acts, auspicious activities are needed to create an auspicious atmosphere. For such acts, somewhere Ramdhun is sung with dholak, cymbals and harmonium; somewhere song and sound rise with drum and pipahi. Not only that, in family festivals too, the songs of mothers and sisters continue in a collective voice.

Just as a five-year-old child, after having his name entered in school, studies with other children in the second or third class, so

Shambhu too, wherever he heard the sound of dholak and cymbals or drum and pipahi, would go straight to that place and, like a student of the Veda, gather his eyes and ears and keep watching and listening until the gathering stopped for rest. Because of Shambhu's movements, Santokhidas and Sukhni felt free and went on doing their respective work. They had understood that wherever the drum and pipahi were sounding, Shambhu would be there. So when Santokhidas returned from work in the fields, he would go directly to that place, find Shambhu and bring him home.

Society too moves by making such paths that life, laughing and playing, goes on forever without weariness. Why would it not? Does a stream wait for anyone's hope or anyone's path? Just as a stream moves day and night by its own motion, so society too keeps moving by its own pace.

By the time the ninth year came upon him, little Shambhua had become Shambhu. The reason was that in Shambhu an inclination towards a different kind of work had begun to appear, unlike other children. Just as a jivani, a knower of life, after the rains in groves, bushes and orchards, in Asin and Kartik recognises new plants as soon as they rise above the soil by looking at their branches and leaves, and knows this is the plant of such-and-such thing, while an ignorant person cannot recognise it; so the discerning eyes of society began to recognise Shambhu. Just as a small child, finding on creepers and weeds a green four-legged thing whose mouth is long like a horse's, takes it to be a horse, catches it, and makes it a part of his play, like a circus; so Shambhu too became a part of the kirtan circle. From the beginning, people have always recognised some things that are gathered and some things still ungathered, lost in the wild growth of people. Had this not been so, why would certain wild creatures become objects of hunting? If a wild animal tries to destroy the cultivation or cattle that human beings have raised, why would the cultivator watch his own labour being destroyed before his eyes? Yet such discerning people who live close by often fail to recognise their own children. How will they recognise them? A human being is

not a tree or plant, to be known by the colour and shape of its branch and the pattern of its leaves. A human being, though placed in the category of living beings and in the row of life, is a world larger and wider than others, laden with flowers and fruits, one who keeps his qualities hidden inside rather than outside. Whether he has kept them hidden, or they have been kept hidden, is a different matter.

Shambhu, who until now had remained hidden among the crowd of children in the human fair, now began to rise and show himself like a plant of paddy or wheat. But since the colour and form had not yet deepened much, neither he himself nor others could see him clearly. Though in the humid month of Bhado the flashes of the easterly and westerly winds may not be felt, in Magh such flashes certainly reveal their form. Something similar happened to Shambhu. From one eye to another, from one ear to another, words and seeds of thought began to spread. But a seed is a seed. In some, the fruit itself is the seed; in some, only the kernel; in some, the leaf is the seed; in some, the branch. As many minds, so many fields. As many fields, so many colours of plants. As many plants, so many hopes of fruit and flowers. But the seed of human beings is the strangest of all, truly wondrous. According to the field, seeds of many kinds fall and many kinds of plants are born together. Seeing the plant, someone would say:

"Shambhu's love for music is growing so much that one day he may leave home and family and go away with it."

Someone else would say:

"God is giving Shambhu skill and understanding as though to His own son; one day He will surely call him close."

To attain divinity in the form of knowledge, one has to find the path of the beloved. Without understanding it, that path had begun to enter Shambhu. Just as the same soil or the same water, on finding a place, takes different forms and spreads different qualities, so is society too. Fields are divided by earthen boundaries; water is divided by the enclosures it receives. Is society not the same? Society too has

different forms, different meanings. In some places, the boundary of the village is taken as society; in some, caste is its basis. In some places society is formed by work; in others, by occupation. The society of the kirtan circle is one in which people, after managing home and family, reach God's court and place before Him their good and bad, their rightful pleas and supplications. For this, neither companions nor instruments are necessary. By clapping hands, snapping fingers, opening the mouth without instruments, or even without opening the mouth, for whatever time one receives, one may, like Radha, become absorbed with Krishna.

By the time the ninth year was almost spent, Shambhu became a member of the village kirtan circle. For this, neither his name needed to be written nor any register kept. Only in the diary of the mind did the pen of thought move. But both Shambhu and the circle found a path and a companion for the road ahead. Just as water falling from the roof of a house, finding a small channel, moves forward and reaches the stream, so it happened with Shambhu when he found companions. In the flower garden of the circle too, a new flowering plant sprouted. Just as, in a large herd, a new cow or buffalo feels the joy of a happy life on finding the society of its own kind, so Shambhu formed a bond with lovers of many-coloured arts. Just as a labourer goes with basket and spade, a mechanic with wrench and hammer, to offer his service, so Shambhu too, with his khanjari, began to offer his service among the members of the circle.

Every Tuesday evening there was kirtan at the Mahavirji shrine, and every Sunday evening at the Mahadev shrine. In these gatherings, along with the society of the kirtan circle, devotees and lovers of song assembled too. After eating and drinking, they remained absorbed in bhajan and kirtan until night, while the listeners, along with their companions, swayed and floated as in the sea. But child-minded Shambhu understood neither the certainty of days nor that of months. He did not understand how Tuesday came again and again, nor how Sunday returned. So he wandered in darkness. But just as finding the next path resolves doubt, Shambhu

too began to recognise Tuesday and Sunday. Just as a seeker goes into dense woods and bushes and brings back some herb or necessary plant, so Shambhu too sought out Tuesday and Sunday. He recognised the virtues and faults of all seven days and all twelve months and planted them in his mind. Through this he came to know the pilgrimages hidden within the thirty days of a month and the eight watches of all seven days. It is the watches themselves that decide when, between night and day, the work of the house should be done and when the work outside. The spring breeze is not only for seed and grain; it is equally beautiful for everyone, whether someone enjoys the delight of Kumbhakarna's sleep or reaches Brahmalok and sets the potter's wheel turning. Until the wheel turns, how will new vessels be shaped?

Shambhu's mind began to skim and skip day and night like a field or pond on whose edge one stands and throws a broad potsherd or clod over the water, and it skips along the surface far into the distance; like the joy one feels on seeing a light grain head of paddy skim from one ridge to another. So his mind too kept skimming and skipping.

As soon as sleep broke in the morning, Shambhu, lying on his bedding, began to wait for the path of the day's life. By evening, just as Krishna, returning with his companions, gives his stick and blanket to Mother Yashoda and goes for evening worship, so Shambhu too, with the rising sun, began to think of the arrangement for seeing the world. Does God's gaze not first fall upon that worshipper who holds, in a new sikki basket decorated with fresh flowers and unbroken rice, flowers from a new plant? The rest are kept by counting them one by one. On the tree, the mark of the fruit of patience is visible like jackfruit. The whole day lies ahead. Whenever I go towards the fields and groves, something or the other will certainly be found. If it is found, that is excellent; if not, I shall plead and pray, become distressed, place a cotton wick in a plate, weep and cry, and speak to Him. If He listens to others, He will listen to me too. If not, He will listen to no one. People will live by their own deeds and their own

fate.

In society, vast as the fourteen worlds, there are many ghats like the ghats of Chitrakoot. More or less, everyone's mind holds faith in God, even if they do not understand the philosophical form of soul, life and maya. This is not only true of men, but of women too. With surrender, discipline and devotion, they observe fasts from eight hours to seventy-two hours, smiling and laughing through them. What kind of wife would stop her husband from going to a temple? Within society, in a collective voice, Ashtayam, Navah, dance and many other social activities take place. On such occasions, seated on a platform, people sing and play together. The same tradition exists among mothers and sisters too. Whether it is a tonsure or the sacred-thread ceremony, Kumar songs or a wedding, Chhathi or Phagua, all come together and sing collectively. New women singers are created and receive opportunity too. The grandmothers and elder women say generously that now they have grown old, phlegm surrounds their throats, so let the young women sing.

In the social atmosphere, along with reverence and love, the practical side of brotherhood still exists. This does not mean that criminal tendencies are suppressed. They had advanced, and they have advanced greatly. Before one's eyes, misconduct towards sisters and daughters, the forceful breaking and taking of things from orchards and bushes, the damaging of crops in the field, and many other such acts continue. Not one but many criminal tendencies have pressed society down with their power. But does that mean life has no hope? It has. It has hope through dharma and love. If that were not so, why would a farmer working in his orchard, bushes or fields offer two mangoes to villagers, household people or travellers on the road? Why would he bring forward one sajmain and give it, saying that they may make curry for the children?

Where in his mind is the thought that ten rupees are being lost? At the time of planting itself, he plants two fruit trees: one for the family and one for society. If such a tendency had been adopted in family after family, would today's breaking of social relationships

have come?

On Sundays and Tuesdays, kirtan at the shrine went on without fail, like the working days of a school. On other days too, it kept taking place from one darwajja to another, as though everyone's life moved bound by it. All day people remained engaged in fields and with cattle; as evening fell, they reached the kirtan circle, which continued with food and drink until night. After eating and drinking, they slept. Where did they ever find time to think of anything contrary to society? Whoever invited the circle to hold kirtan at his place arranged food and the necessary things according to his means.

On the first day, Shambhu too received one and a quarter cubits of cloth and one and a quarter anna. After eating, when Shambhu was about to leave, he found himself in a fix. In two hands he had three things: money, cloth and khanjari. How would he carry them through the dark night? He could tie the money in the cloth and carry that in one hand, and hold the khanjari in the other; that much was possible. But how would he walk through the blind night with both hands occupied? On the uneven path, who knew where he might stumble and where not? If he asked the householder to walk with him, that too would not be proper. There were many others like him. With how many would the man go? If he placed the cloth on his shoulder or tied it around his waist, it would become worn cloth. How could he give his father the cloth that had already been used? Lost in this thought, Shambhu saw a man going towards his house and sent word to his father:

"Please tell Babu that the dalna, the mixed vegetable was made so tasty that I ate more than I wished. On top of that, with three things in my hands, how could I come in the dark? So let him come and take me."

By the time he completed eleven years, Shambhu began to be counted not only among the village bhajan singers, but also among the devotees of God. And among those devotees, he was one who was unmarried, a brahmachari. In Shambhu's nature too there were special qualities, different from ordinary children, and everyone saw

them. Some, even after passing the age of fifteen, remain behind a child of five in skill and understanding, while some children become like grown men by the age of ten. But society is a fathomless sea. As the examiner, so the examination. Like the sea that gathers everything from shells and pebbles to diamonds and pearls, so is society. There are discerning persons who rear one kind of animal, cows and buffaloes, and yet see far into the lives of other kinds of animals too; and there are those who, though everything lies before their eyes every day, see nothing of the path of life.

In the same way, discerning people recognised Shambhu. Because of this, Shambhu began to be counted among the higher order of kirtan singers in the circle. A guru is always looking for a disciple. Only when disciple and guru come together does life move forward. Until that happens, sugar remains dissolved in the juice of sugarcane, and the disciple is taken to be no more than a reed plant. Shambhu found two gurus at once. One was the living leader, from instrumentalist to singer; the other was the world of instruments and music. Just as the mistress of a household remains ever green in mind on seeing grains and provisions of many colours stored in many-coloured rooms, so Shambhu too began to grow green.

Until then, Shambhu was counted by his parents as a child who carried no burden of work, but whose life had to be kept alive as part of parental duty. In that sense, Shambhu too was like an animal without a rope. Now, however, Shambhu had grown sturdier. Whenever he felt hungry, he would run home; otherwise he could remain hungry all day. Did that mean his place for eating, drinking and staying had disappeared? No. All that remained. Yes, this much certainly happened: there was no one to ask when he came and when he went. Sukhni had already told Santokhidas that a child is corrected not from behind but from ahead. Just as the root of a rahar plant holds the soil from all sides, so it is with human beings too. But the skilled cultivator strikes six blows of the spade close to the root in such a way that his own feet are saved and the root too is loosened. Therefore, the best kind of work is one in which the snake is killed

and the stick remains unbroken.

There was a reason why no household work was placed upon Shambhu. His parents' hearts were enclosed by the thought that if, while mother and father were still alive, a son or daughter had to bear any burden, then like a banana plant, or some other tender plant, the child would be crushed and mashed into weakness. The body would be strained. Once the body is strained, life too will be strained. Like a diseased plant, it would remain irritable and weak all day. If such becomes the life of sons and daughters, how long can the family move forward? Therefore, until children are kept healthy, the idea of carrying the lineage forward is mere imagination. For this reason, neither did the parents assign any work to Shambhu, nor did Shambhu do anything. Though everything was his, Shambhu understood nothing as his own. So he remained like a drawn bow. Only after reaching the depth of household work does one understand what loss comes to the family if a particular task is not done. This life itself is like a bubble of rainwater: it forms, shines and bursts. To run after such a life, more fleeting than the fleeting itself, would be foolishness. Perhaps King Janak understood this and therefore did not consider enjoyment and pleasure evil. Whatever may have been in Shambhu's mind, his parents certainly thought that as long as they were sturdy, if they stole their bodies away from work, it would be an injustice to the family. In old age, as the grains from a dried paddy-head fall one by one, so the parts of the body too, eyes, ears and the rest, will fall away. When the body begins to break, will not sons and daughters, like Shravan Kumar, carry their parents on a shoulder-yoke to places of pilgrimage? Such a task is already laid upon them; why add another nine maunds of burden like a corpse? What will the poor child do? On one side, the burden of parents will fall upon him; he will have his own life; on top of that, who knows how many children God will give and how many not? Does He know how costly food and water have become? Where marua once sold on a par with fish, there marua has thinned out and left the country, while fish has become the mistress of the household and sits glowing on the cement

hearth.

Though now growing up, Shambhu had learnt to keep pace with time. After moving with the troupe through the day, when everyone else retired to bed, he would examine the harmonium, the dholak, the cymbals and the other instruments closely, with the curiosity of a child learning to ride a bicycle. Just as a young man and a young woman become aware of each other at first glance, Shambhu began to understand the relationship among the instruments. He saw that society is sustained not by one alone, but by many bonds and associations. In such relationships, different qualities blend with one another and move forward together, crossing even the most difficult paths and catching a glimpse of the flower garden of Rishi Shringi. He wondered how a cymbal made from a single piece could move so gracefully in step with a harmonium made from many joined pieces. Shambhu's affection for the troupe gradually deepened.

Before the fifth decade, the basic mantra of Ashtayam kirtan was "Sitaram, Sitaram". The reason too is clear. This was Mithila, the land of Janaki, mother of the world, whose resolve was fulfilled by Ram. In the Sitaram mantra, Shambhu began to find everything according to time and season. As the mind is, so is the thought. In the early dawn, at the time of prabhati, Shambhu found in "Sitaram" the rasa of spring or of Brahmani, while with the movement of day and night, even rasa began to change its flavour. But the mantra did not change. Though still child-minded, Shambhu, like a jivani, understood the small, delicate turn of sajmain, not like Hanumanji, who would use a great weapon even for a little work. Nor was he like the raw and untrained, who sing evening songs in the morning and morning songs in the evening. If he did sing so, then it was like a confectioner making many-coloured things and dipping them in sugar syrup to make them sweet. Something like this rose in Shambhu's mind. Of course, as many kinds of mantras as were needed did not all come to him. If they did not come, that was not his fault. Why would it be his fault? First, the poor boy was tied to a single peg like an animal; on top of that, he was child-minded. Yet

he was not like a kid goat that, as soon as it drinks milk, begins to jump and spring about.

Without saying a word and without thinking it through, Shambhu ran away from home. Santokhidas and Sukhni had both gone to work in the field. So the whole day no suspicion came to them. There was a reason too. On other days as well, until noon he remained away here and there, and they looked for him only in the evening. That too because the day is for roaming and moving, but night is for finding one's place.

As soon as he left home, Shambhu forgot everything of the house. He forgot the khanjari too. Not exactly forgot; it slipped from his mind. According to the pilgrimage of his heart, he found the new light of a new moon. Just as a toddy-tapper, climbing a date-palm, catches hold of the palmyra, so the khanjari in Shambhu's hand caught hold of the tabla. Once the tabla caught him, Shambhu began to play it with the same hand that knew the khanjari. How far he went while playing, he did not know. He disappeared into the world. Wherever he looked, he saw nothing except the day. Fields and groves, trees and plants, ponds and marshes, light and dried-up streams and ridges are present in every village. Those who make boundaries and embankments, or those who look at maps and land records, may understand fields, villages and homes; those who do not understand these things, what else will they understand except day and night? Shambhu too was like that.

In the middle of the road, Shambhu's mind began to leap. As it leapt, he remembered the words spoken by the leader of the village kirtan circle. He remembered that at Pachgachhia there were large instruments and also players. Food and drink were given there, and arrangements for staying were available too. Just as a seed pierces the earth, sprouts upward and rejoices in itself as the earlier form of a tree, so too does the bud of a child's understanding awaken. The same happened with Shambhu. Excited, he left home and set out. But to reach a particular place, information was needed. True, if one wishes to see not a particular place but a general place, no introduction is

needed. Whatever one sees, however much one sees, wherever one sees, that itself is the world. As is the light of the eyes, so is the colour of the world. But to go to Pachgachhia, gathering information was necessary. A thought rose in him: when people go from place to place by asking and finding out, why can I not go too? As others cross roads and ghats and reach their places, why should I not reach mine? Along with the hunger of the stomach, the hunger of the mind decreased. As hunger decreased, the power of resolve arose.

Rai Bahadur Lakshminarayanji of Pachgachhia was as much a connoisseur of music as he was a practitioner. Being a lover of musical art, he had established a Centre for Music. Through it, many singers and instrumentalists of Mithilanchal had gained international fame.

Even after reaching near the centre, eleven or twelve-year-old Shambhu did not have the courage to go inside. Standing to one side, he was like a hungry, thirsty bird of the desert that sees no trace of food or water far and wide; like a shell of the sea, mouth open, waiting for a drop of rain under the Swati constellation. Just then Mangan Mandal came out. He was an internationally known connoisseur of music. As soon as his eyes fell upon Shambhu, they were drawn to him. But the boy's face showed its hunger. Without asking anything, Mangan Mandal caught Shambhu by the left arm, brought him inside the centre and fed him. After eating, Shambhu's mind became steady.

Mangan asked:

"Boy, what is your name?"

"Shambhu."

"Who all are there in your family?"

"Babu and Ma."

"Do you have brothers or sisters?"

"Yes."

"Stay today. Tomorrow we shall talk calmly."

“Very well.”

The day passed; evening came. Darkness began to arrive from outside. As darkness came, it grew blacker. It grew so black that one’s own eyes could not see one’s hand. Whoever was where began preparing to curl up there. Only two eyelids, like door panels, sometimes opened and sometimes closed. Fear began to enter him. As fear made its place, Shambhu began to feel frightened. He started crying. As he cried, mother and father, companions, the village and home rose in his mind.

How could he not remember them? Even a mud road speaks in darkness: brother, here there is a sharp edge; ahead there is a hollow. True, according to the road the open pit is not much, but small holes dug by many feet belong to everyone; cross the road carefully. Then his mother’s cooking rose again in Shambhu’s mind. It must be time for food and night. After cooking, Ma must be wandering about looking for him. In her mind she must be saying: evening has fallen; why has Shambhu not yet come? After calling four times, Babu too, tired and upset, must have left his food and lain down on the bedding.

His mind was elsewhere, his body elsewhere; Shambhu’s condition became like that of a prisoner in jail. Hiccups came, and they kept increasing. Mangan, standing before him, was caught in uncertainty. How could he not be? It was the first day of life, the first scene. Like an unseen scene of a play, wholly new. As a student without examination fees, at the final hour of four o’clock for filling the form, suddenly faces a grave illness in the family; as a drunkard’s mind goes astray in the hot noon of Jeth, so Mangan began to feel. On one side was the question of a future life; on the other, this boy had come alone to a place where everyone was unknown to him. Mangan’s mind danced towards Lord Ram. In place of the kingdom of Ayodhya, Ram received the forest. But after leaving Ayodhya and crossing the Ganga, he kept finding one hermitage or another of rishis and munis; then what was the forest to him?

But at once Mangan’s mind turned to the old mother in his village. The poor woman, on the very day her daughter died after

giving birth to a granddaughter, became a mother from a grandmother and named the granddaughter after her dead daughter, Dulari. Enthusiasm awakened in him. His mind said: I shall not let this child wander. Even if I have to pass the night awake, I shall do so. Yet fear remained alive. At once another thought rose: what if sleep comes suddenly, and in that moment he runs away?

Like a thicketed forest, Mangan could find no path. Even when a path seemed to appear, it was like a path through the pits and reeds of Kosi-region, ending almost as soon as it began. And why would it not end? Do hunger, thirst and sleep come after asking anyone? True, they may be driven away by sleeping, or by eating and drinking. When he found the next possible step, Mangan placed the key of the room's lock beneath his pillow. Yet fear kept pressing upon him: when I am deep in sleep and Shambhu wants to run away, can he not take the key from under the pillow?

But now, slowly, sweetness began to enter the sound of Shambhu's crying. Perhaps sleep was arriving. Sweet crying too is one form of ease. Even so, Mangan's mind remained restless. As resolve arises at the boundary between home and the world outside, or between the journey to a pilgrimage and the pilgrimage place itself, so it rose in Mangan too. With these very eyes, he would see tomorrow's sun. But passing the night alone was not easy either.

Mangan began to sink into the unfathomable water of the sea. Just then his eyes fell, in memory, upon the old woman of the theatre troupe. As soon as he saw her in his mind, a thought rose: that old woman too is an age-wise examiner of the village. I see others who wish to spend the night in the crowd of people, and no one wishes to let them remain in that crowd. But the old woman is an old woman. Whether anyone listens to her or not, she keeps muttering all night. Whether she calls evening morning or morning evening, whatever comes to her mind, she keeps it standing all night like a watchman. Just as a storyteller, comforting a restless wedding party, dips them in many-coloured, delicious syrups of tales, so Mangan Mandal's mind began to mutter. He began to forget Shambhu and sink into his

own duty. Meanwhile, striking hands and feet in the darkness, sleep came and wrapped Shambhu in its hold. As words spoken under fathomless water dissolve into the water itself, so Shambhu's crying dissolved.

From the sound of his breathing through the nose, Mangan became certain that Shambhu had fallen asleep. He grew steady. But at once another thought rose: a startled mind may wake suddenly at any moment. If, seeing Shambhu asleep, I too fall asleep, everything will be ruined.

Of course, the world belongs to those who see. Why would one who truly sees be lost in the world? When all things together make the world, where is the question of being lost? Yet people do need direction. Only when direction is found does one know east as east, west as west, north as north, and south as south. But who mistakes the sky for the netherworld, or the netherworld for the sky? Mangan at once reached that boundary where childhood must be protected. Childhood can be protected only when someone keeps watch over it. Meanwhile, the importance of himself, his companions and the institution rose in his mind. His mind began to murmur.

Human life is life only when one plants a forest of life. Of course, such power cannot arise all at once. But there must be essential understanding of every part: branch, leaf, crown, fruit and flower. Many people had gone out from this place and become singers and instrumentalists, displaying their strength before the world. Why should that mango and jamun not have patience, which will give up its body along with its children for the sake of the orchard?

As I have remained engaged until today in building home and family, so long as the boatman remains in the body, I shall keep rowing the boat. When I go in the morning to take Shambhu to his village, I shall not simply turn back and return. It has been many days since I met Sariyadasin, a singer of heaven. But I shall not go straight to her; I shall start from one place and make everyone meet him. Yes, I shall certainly do that. But only if Guruji agrees. As soon as one day

turns into another, he will begin to make enquiries. He will send message after message. That too is necessary. If he is not here, who will tend the corners and edges of his beautiful garden?

Whatever happens, I shall certainly go to Bal Govindji's place. He is the one who has been guarding the flourishing garden of Baragam. And, of course, his own trained companion Mahendra is there too. Mahendra, Balanand, Shankar, Sanjeev, Ramnarayan, Vinay, Bechan; and from there, passing by Ram Prasad Mahto's place, I shall move ahead. Not going would not be proper either. A human being is not a tortoise that lays eggs and runs away. But he is not a crab either, whose own belly is hollowed out by what it carries within. I shall also meet Sheetnarayan, Surendra and Ajay.

Whether the meetings will happen or not, there is no certainty, because all of them have become flying birds. Oh! Ram Prasad is excessively tender at heart, full of feeling. As love, upon finding the path of the beloved, becomes certain that the beloved is walking alongside, so is Ram Prasad. But I shall not get caught in too much lingering. Only if I get caught in lingering will many days be spent; if I do not, why will it take long? Yes, I shall do one thing: whenever I meet anyone, I shall make them speak to Guruji over the mobile. Only when he meets them will he understand what family and renunciation are.

When I go that way, if I do not meet Hitaidas, Bechan Mandal, Ram Gulamdas, Ramayani Devi, Chhathudas, Darbaridas, Batahu Mandal, Lakhandas, Radheshyamji, Ramjidas, Baua Jha and Ram Bhajan, then a bundle of reproach will remain on my forehead for life. If ever they meet me later, even through relatives they will send word: "You came this side and left us out!"

A thought rose in Mangan's mind: is it not through the union of earth and water that living beings are created? The land between the Ganga and Brahmpur is Mithila. Warriors like Ekalavya, one after another, are at work. I shall make a quick trip to Amta as well, the flower garden planted by Radhakrishna and Kartaram. Along with that, I shall also see the garden of the special, miraculous style of

dhrupad. Not only that, I shall meet Padma Shri Ram Chaturji, Vidur, Abhay, Ramkumar, Ramesh and Pathakji too.

His mind lingered. It was midnight. Coming out of the room, he looked towards the sky and felt that darkness had become moist with dew and was turning cool. The light suppressed since evening had come and stood before the darkness. Half the night was still to be kept awake through. If, after one day passes, the cold of Magh can be driven away with a whistle, can half a night not be pushed through with one tune?

Returning to the room, seeing Shambhu, Mangan Mandal went to the bedding and reclined. As soon as he reclined, Panichobh came to mind. Since I must go to Amta, I shall make a quick trip to Panichobh too. Of course, once I go to Panichobh, they will not let me leave before seven full days, counting each day, but I shall not get stuck even there. If I get stuck here, I too shall be swept away from my own purpose. Without going, how shall I see in what way the orchard planted by Avadhji is being guarded by Ramchandra, Dineshwar, Rajkumar, Mangnu, Fulanand and Bhupendra?

From that side, I must also go to Kharbanji, who has kept alive the guru-disciple tradition of Banaras. Along with that, I shall also see how the trees of Krishna-leela and Ramkatha planted by Mansa Mishra and Dihi Mishra are being reared by Situ, Hira, Bhagat, Ramji, Parmeshwari, Anant, Damman, Satyanarayan and Ramvriksha Singh. On the way, Darbaridas too will fall on the route, but he is a wandering man; whether I meet him or not, who knows. Well, at least I shall see the village. Not only that, in future I shall not be guilty either.

As morning came, the voices of birds began to rise from orchards, groves and bamboo clumps on all sides. Some were telling their companions that morning sleep is very sweet, so take one more round of sleep. Others were saying that after the sun rises there will be time enough to fly from one corner of the world to another; therefore whatever flying can be done before that will place us ahead.

Hearing the birds, Mangan's mind found patience: perhaps morning was near. The night had passed; sleep had not come even once. Now, even if Shambhu woke, last night's fear would not chase him. But a question rose: what had been the purpose of staying awake all night?

Whether they are birds and tiny creatures living in trees, creatures living in ponds, creatures living in earth, or even those living in stone, the parents of all guard them until they become independent and gain a life of their own.

In the morning, after taking Shambhu to his village, Mangan moved ahead.

As soon as Santokhidas and Sukhni saw Shambhu, the anxiety of the whole night flew away. They did not even feel the need to ask where he had spent the night. In their minds, they had already thought that he must have been somewhere with a kirtan circle, in God's bhajan and kirtan. Even so, as soon as their eyes fell upon Shambhu, their hearts filled with joy. A thought rose in them: a human being cannot be tied like cattle. As he keeps moving forward, life's own bonds will gather around him. Delighted, Santokhidas asked:

"Baua, we had not seen you since yesterday. Had you gone somewhere else?"

His father's affection awakened Shambhu's own affection. He said:

"Babu, since yesterday morning my mind had been unsettled. However much I tried to make it steady, it would not become so. Again and again Pachgachhia came to mind."

Santokhidas asked:

"How did you come to know of Pachgachhia?"

Shambhu said:

"It used to be discussed often in the kirtan circle. As if I forgot everything. I forgot everything and set out without telling anyone. I had gone there. There are great singers and instrumentalists there."

Santokhidas asked: "What need was there to go so far for that? I hear there will be Ramleela in our own village for a month. How much will you watch then?"

Shambhu said:

"In how many days will it come?"

Santokhidas said:

"It will come next month. Now it is Asin-Katik, is it not? Even the granaries of kings and nobles become empty then. And both these months are such that every day is a festival. Next month, the cutting and threshing of paddy will also begin, and the rain and drizzle will stop."

Shambhu asked:

"Will the same thing happen every day, like cinema?"

Santokhidas said:

"No. Just as a child is born, then begins to crawl, falls and rises, stands and walks, reads and writes, gets married, brings the bride home, and forms a household. By then the mother and father too have become old. He serves and tends them. The same happens in Ramleela too. Every day has a different colour. Because of that, it costs more and takes more time. Therefore people watch it to their heart's fill. The work on which more time, labour and expense are spent becomes that much larger and better, does it not?"

Shambhu asked:

"Has it ever happened in our village?"

Santokhidas said:

"No. Is Ramleela some small thing that every village can do it? It is like Durga Puja. Festivals, worship and rituals take place in every home, but to organise Durga Puja, the villagers must be bound together, rope by rope. Ramleela is the same."

From the morning after Chhath, hurried bustle began. The colour of the fields started changing. First there was the cultivation of many-coloured paddy; then, over that, the changing colour of the

paddy itself. The farmer who saw the full field in the afternoon returned home happy with the desire to see it again in the morning; and the one who saw it bathed in dew at dawn came away with the hope of seeing it again in the afternoon. Just as in a full and prosperous family all parts of the body move fully and well, so, because the time was favourable, the paddy too had been good from the beginning. As farmers disappear into the fields while working, so labourers disappear in Aghan. Who does not cultivate even two or four kathas?

Ramleela was to begin on the morning of Kartik Purnima. Therefore, eight or nine days before its arrival, Kamal Narayan of Rahua, Garib Jha, Jalesar and Dayakant reached the village around three o'clock, as the day was declining. The villagers had known for fifteen or twenty days that Ramleela would take place. Yet it was like the approach of a wedding: the real auspicious moment begins only when the bride and bridegroom start to be seen.

As soon as they reached the village, the news of their arrival spread with the wind. Standing under the mango tree by the village boundary, the four men began to discuss how they would talk with the villagers. Without conversation, the work could not move ahead. But how were they to address the villagers? This too was no small task. Even now, society has no shortage of people who, unless urged, will not go even to attend illness, wedding or cremation. What then would they do for outsiders? That was certainly a difficult question. Yet one thing was still true: when new people or new things came into a village, people went to see them without being told, even if they made the excuse of going towards the fields. Kamal Narayan asked Garib Jha:

"We have reached the village. What will happen next?"

Hearing Kamal Narayan's words, Garib Jha lifted his eyes towards the village and saw that one or two people, one after another, were coming along the narrow channel of the path. Pointing to them, Garib Jha said: "Just as we want to show Ramleela to the villagers,

so the villagers too will make arrangements to see it. Such work gets done through eagerness."

Until now Ramleela had not taken place in the village because there was neither a single landlord nor a leading tenant there. The farmers were of limited means and small stomachs. Their own life was a mountain. It was an area of flood and drought. One year of flood or drought pushed a farmer five years back. In such a place, how would the thought of Durga Puja or Ramleela rise in people's minds? Yet the village had one pride: in two hundred years, the number of people and families had increased tenfold. It was not that people of that village did not know the income of Bombay, Calcutta and Delhi. They knew. But their love for the village and their Vishwamitra-like stubborn vitality were also strong. Why would they not be? Are drought, flood, storm, tempest or earthquake things that happened only today? Have they not always happened, and will they not continue to happen? Like dirt on the palm, rub it twice and it comes off. Not only that, the village also had this pride: though it was a village of twelve castes, never had sticks and lathis come out among them, nor had they had to pay the offerings of court and litigation.

In the course of conversation between the Ramleela party and the villagers, it was decided that Barham Sthan was a public place, and therefore they would sit there and continue the discussion. That is what happened.

Among the people, Kamalji's heart overflowed. He was a lover of art. Moved, he said:

"Till today, I had never seen such a village, where such a meeting of hearts has taken place. It seems different from all the villages I have seen so far. Where does one find such attraction towards Ramleela in any village?"

But immediately his mind moved ahead. Was this because of people's faith in Lord Ram, or because of entertainment? And is entertainment a companion that walks with life, or something separate from life? Karma and joy join together and become leela.

Everyone looked at everyone else's face to see who would say what. There was a reason too. Each considered himself new and wished to take in the fragrance of a new flower. Seeing everyone silent, Kamalji again said:

"Not only this time. Whenever you give us the opportunity to present the leela, we shall certainly keep presenting it in future too."

Just as in a royal court some people do not need permission to speak, so it was with Garibji among the mediators of the Ramleela party. As his name was Garib, so was his face, plain as a cut slice. Inside and outside, He was of one colour—neither American like a slice of gamhar wood, nor European like a slice of jackfruit, simply, entirely Indian, like a slice of mango. All twenty-four hours, art scattered from his body. Smiling, he said:

"Brothers, just as we, along with Kamal Bhai, have found this noble society and come as humble servants to offer our art, so you too must make pairs and combinations and become our companions."

Everyone began to nod. Meanwhile, laughing, Garib Jha spoke again:

"As you see with hijras and hijranis, no village and no society ties them down and keeps them; so do not hide anything from us either."

Saying this, he looked towards Kamalji and added:

"Come, brother, now tell them your next thought."

Kamalji kept turning Garib Jha's thought over in his mind. He felt that perhaps all the Ramleela parties in their region had kept circling within one boundary. Because of this, all did not receive an equal atmosphere in which to rise. Perhaps they remained confined within a few counted villages and a few counted societies. Yet it was also not false that as much as Ramleela needed to be seen and shown, there were not enough groups for it; but that did not mean people did not watch. Just as human beings live in five-storeyed houses and human beings live also in the guard's hut in the field, so apart from Ramleela, drama, nautanki, theatre, raas, orchestra, folk dance,

thematic kirtan, qawwali and other forms also continue. As Ramkatha moves in Ramleela, so it moves in folk dance too. Smiling, Kamal said:

"Today you are our hosts, and we are your guests. We are people who live among groves and trees, so we shall place only a light burden on you. At night, we shall all sit together calmly and discuss everything. For now, tell us only this: do you desire it from your heart?"

There was, first of all, the joy that Ramleela would be held in the village for the very first time; over that, the village's own excitement was already alive. In one voice, everyone gave assent.

The next evening, after moving about towards the open fields, everyone sat together. Drawing the people's happiness towards himself, Garib Jha stood up and said:

"You all must understand that a stage will be built for the Ramleela. Behind the stage there will be arrangements for the artistes, and in front, for the audience. For the stage and the arrangements behind it, we already have bamboo, poles and curtains. As for the arrangements in front of the stage, that equipment will have to be managed by society."

Hearing Garib Jha's words, Santokhidas repeated them to himself and said:

"Please explain it a little more clearly, Garib Babu. I could not understand it properly."

Garib Jha explained:

"We have performed Ramleela in many villages. In every village there is some difference or other. In many villages, separate enclosures are put up for male spectators and for women. In some villages, this is not done. That is what I meant."

Santokhidas smiled and said:

"Garib Bhai, before speaking of the spectators, speak first of the performers. Among the performers, there will not be...?"

Hearing Santokhidas's question, Garib Jha grew embarrassed. The matter inside his stomach wanted to cover itself and come out in a muffled voice, but thinking of himself as an artiste, he held back. Hearing the exchange between the two, Kamalji could not remain silent. But his gaze did not fall upon the village society; it fell upon his own troupe. We all sit together, eat and drink together, sleep and rest together. Along with household life, wives and children, we think about art and literature and discuss movement and liberation. Then why has such a question arisen?

Kamal Babu's mind received a jolt. He fell silent. Everyone began to look towards him. He had a lean body of fifty-five or sixty years, the front tooth of his mouth was broken, and his hair had turned grey. Yet no one said anything. A thought rose in Kamal Babu's mind: just as a cowshed is a sacred place for a cow, a school for a student, and a hospital for a patient, so the stage is a sacred place for a lover of art. This very Garib Jha had once been a teacher in a primary school. He never gave his salary to his family. He spent all his days going about after cinema or theatre. But when his own troupe stood up, he left the school and came away. The same is true of Dayakant. He lived in Banaras and learnt classical and semi-classical music. Jalesar too came from the Manchobhiya dance tradition. I myself have lived in Pachgachhia through my relatives. Again a thought rose: truth wears no mask. Overwhelmed, he said:

"Every work has its own boundary. The boundary that belongs to you is your responsibility, and the boundary that belongs to us is ours. If each of us, as gatekeepers, offers our service honestly, no kind of filth will enter."

Hearing Kamal Narayanji's thought, Santokhidas said:

"Till today Ramleela has never taken place in this village. Therefore, if we think and understand only by guesswork, some gap will certainly remain somewhere. But I will not say that such a division is compulsory; it may not be needed either. It depends on the village's arrangement. As the arrangement of a village is, so the work in that village will be. Within the village, however, a web has spread

like a spider's web. There are dances and worships too in which certain castes are allowed entry and certain castes are forbidden. Yet the basic question is of art and dharma. In the same way, along with human beings, even gods and art have been divided. Because of this, a strong partition has come up."

Hearing Santokhidas's words, Garib Jha burst into laughter and asked:

"Then?"

Seeing Garib Jha's curiosity, Santokhidas smiled and said:

"The one who understands the root of a tree can understand the qualities of that tree. But here, the tree itself is only beginning to be born. The time for such questions has not yet come."

Garib Jha asked:

"Then?"

Santokhidas said: "Yes, since we are still only at the stage between house and outside, it would be good to make the path for the future now itself. Of course, no rule can be permanent. Since society moves with time, rules too must move with it. Some improvement will then keep taking place according to the need of time. Our society is such that children of eight or nine from each hamlet, conscious youths, and the old and aged all go together to the fields and groves, sit together and cut grass for three or four hours. They transplant and weed together in the fields. Children from growing age to youth go ten kilometres by bicycle to school and college together. In such a place, should a boundary be created in a place like Ramleela? What kind of...?"

Hearing Santokhidas's question, Kamal glanced sideways at Garib, Garib at Jalesar, and Jalesar at Kamal. All three began to wander in different directions within themselves. Their eyes would not meet. Something like what happens when small children see only the upper part of a kesaur plant and try to dig it out with their hands began to happen in the minds of the three. But the matter would not go down their throats. Dayakant remained like a drawn bow. In his

mind, he was performing the immersion of the monsoon and matching the rhythm and measure of the samdaun. Just then Kamal Narayan asked: “What do you say, Daya?”

As someone unexpectedly gives an answer to a sudden question, Dayakant, keeping the beat of his head, quickly said: “Yes, yes, everything is good.”

But as soon as the spell broke, he began to wonder: what answer have I given to Bhai? He asked for an opinion, and I answered like a child. It was as though a confused traveller had been shown a road with confidence, though the road itself had not been seen. Was it not like that? This was not the time to match the measure of a samdaun. How could the same rhythm that follows death serve at the time of birth? And why should it not? What difference is there between birth and death? It is not like the ridge of a field, where one must place a hand on the waist to climb from the field to the ridge. This is a brick-paved road; avoid the broken bricks and place your feet on the whole ones as you walk.

Hearing Dayakant’s answer, Kamal grew still more confused. If everything is good, then what is bad? If there is no bad, why is a demon born? And if there is no demon, why is there not flesh and blood in the body of man? Just then Garib Jha and Jalesar too looked towards Kamal to complete their turn. Both mouths fluttered to speak. But who would speak first? In Jalesar’s mind was the thought: I regard Garib Bhai as a guru; even now he teaches me much. In Garib Jha’s mind, however, another thought rose: as artistes, both have one life, but within the bonds of village and society they are two. Therefore Jalesar’s thought is needed first. Otherwise, if a patient suffering from twenty-five diseases is not treated first and a patient with only one disease is treated, the more seriously ill patient will certainly die. But no; if treatment for twenty-five diseases is available, then the treatment of one disease can be done with a single dose of coramine. With a signal of his eyes, Jalesar urged Garib.

In the mind of teacher Garib Jha, the question flashed like lightning: from which side should the patient’s disease be treated?

Seeing Jalesar and Garib Jha's uncertainty, Kamal Narayanji felt that there was certainly some deep pit somewhere. Turning the direction of thought, Kamal Narayanji laughed and said:

"On the first day of life, we have found such an occasion of joy!"

Saying this, he fell silent. A thought rose in his mind: when a house catches fire, even a blind man wants to run, but because he has no eyes, he stumbles and falls again and again into humps and hollows. If a lame man senses it and says that he will save his life, the lame man will surely say, Brother, who can see whom here, that I should see you or you should see me? You have no eyes to walk by seeing, and I have no legs to take even one step, though I may see.

To Kamalji, who was blooming like a lotus, Santokhidas said:

"Bhai, as long as you are on the stage, you will remain in the form of Ram, Hanuman or Ravan. But after that, whatever time remains, you will remain as brothers and kinsmen of society, will you not? I too have a son of twelve or thirteen. He is here. As long as you all stay here, he will remain in your service."

Kamal laughed and said:

"The fruit of service is sweet reward."

What the patient desires, the vaid prescribes. As soon as Shambhu heard his own name, he sprang up and touched Kamalji's feet. But before Kamalji could bless him, Shambhu had already touched the feet of Garib, Jalesar and Dayakant too. Then he turned towards the people, touched his father's feet, and after seeking permission began to touch everyone's feet. His heart was filled with boundless joy, the kind of joy felt by a sister going to her husband's home after duragaman, moving forward from her earlier society towards a new society.

Until then, Kamalji had been thinking how to bless Shambhu. There was a reason. When Shambhu touched his feet, Kamal was sitting in a yogic posture; his right foot was pressed beneath him and the left was outside. That caused the first delay in giving the blessing.

The second delay came because, before he could bless him, Shambhu had touched the feet of all three, and Kamal fell into uncertainty. If, on the day a student enters school or college, there were also a festival of teachers entering among students, a day when all students and teachers, like artistes of the stage, decorated themselves with new faces and displayed new arts, then, just as one artiste gains delight in the form of Nand when he finds a companion, so would that festival also be. Seeing everyone uneasy, Garib Jha stepped in:

"Today Shambhu has come and stopped at that boundary from where direction changes. Society has found a very great hope. But where is patience? Patience will come only when you all take work from him throughout the month. Not only Shambhu; such Shambhus are scattered throughout the flower garden of society."

Hearing Garib Jha's thought, Santokhidas said:

"Garib Bhai, I do not know what others are, but you have become an artiste from being a primary teacher. Therefore, just as the flowers of a garden are not forbidden for worship, and the books of a library are not forbidden, so you too, without attachment or impurity of mind, may roam through this society's flower garden, choose flowers for your worship, and use them in worship and service, in tending and caring."

On the third day after Chhath, the moon in the sky smiled sweetly at its own arrival. As the boundary between cold and warmth is charming, so was the charming atmosphere between the two societies. In one side's mind was the thought that some people would sit together and enjoy Ramleela; in the other's mind, if new art is not displayed among a new society, then whatever society may gain, the artiste will only keep blowing the conch. At two o'clock, that is, in the afternoon, all twenty-seven members of the troupe arrived on a tyre-cart carrying instruments, curtains, costumes, bamboo and poles. They already knew the place in the grove beside the school. One or two villagers also began to arrive. By the time they unloaded the material from the cart and placed it on the fallow ground, people had gathered around. Garib Jha noticed this. As soon as Santokhidas's

eyes fell on him, he asked:

"Bhai, have you welcomed Shambhu properly?"

Hearing Santokhidas's words, Garib Jha said:

"Even after staying with Shambhu for so many days, I could not recognise what Shambhu wants."

Santokhidas asked:

"What do you mean?"

Garib Jha said:

"I mean, from the beginning, someone's eyes turn towards instruments, someone's towards dance, someone's towards singing. But Shambhu is extraordinary. I see in him the same inclination towards playing instruments; and what shall I say of his voice?"

Santokhidas said:

"Now there will be time for talk. Since you have arrived, it will not be good to remain half-hearted. What is your thought?"

Garib Jha said:

"Until now, the thought was that today we would fix the poles. Tomorrow we would put up the curtains and begin the leela."

Santokhidas said:

"You go too far, Garib Bhai. You all only keep watching; the villagers will prepare everything in a single hour. But once you have come to the village, leaving even one day unused would be an injustice to time."

Everything was arranged within an hour. The news that Ramleela would begin from that very day seemed to make everyone's chest beat faster. For a whole month the villagers would watch the stage of a story about life. Why would waves of joy not rise within them? The rain of offerings at the aarati would also certainly fall.

For the whole month, Shambhu worked alongside them. Today it was ending. Tomorrow everyone would move on to another village. Standing on the ridge, Shambhu was thinking. Where is society

changing, where is it growing?

In Santokhidas's mind, the thought kept rising that it is difficult to say anything to someone entering from a small world into a large one. And now, in any case, Shambhu had easily become sharper than a child.

At the time of departure, tears were spilling from Kamalji's eyes, the same tears that belong to a woman leaving for her husband's home.

Within a year, Shambhu entered the rank of the chief artistes of the Ramleela troupe. Usually distinction comes from excellence, but in Shambhu's case the reason for distinction was his many-sided ability. Just as, in the first rain of Adra, the mind of that farmer becomes most restless who must sow many crops at once, whose heart trembles to plant the crop because there are seeds for Aghani paddy and chauri fields too, and there are also many kinds of garma paddy seeds, which depend not on the season but on time. If those seedlings are not uprooted and planted at the right time, the yield will be affected. But if the rain breaks too sharply, the cultivation of the chaur itself will drown. That did not happen with Shambhu. From playing the dholak and harmonium to dancing and acting parts, he became involved in everything. Because of this, Shambhu's importance within the troupe increased. From acting to instrumental performance, Shambhu could fill the place of any absent artiste.

Shambhu remained in Kamalji's Ramleela troupe for seven years. Because of advancing age, Kamal Narayan eventually wound up the troupe. A thunderbolt also fell upon the village's condition. The face of the nearby Kosi began to press westward. Because of this, the scattered settlement of the village was gathered and eroded into clusters; the condition of those who held fields began to worsen. Many families left the village and went away to live in other regions.

At twenty, Shambhu began to understand the measure of his own self, his reach and his limits. Thoughts of many colours began to rise in his mind. Yet despite all his gifts, Shambhu's mind leaned

more towards semi-classical music. As the voice, so the art. The declining condition of feudal households affected classical music. Semi-classical music too was affected, but less so. Taking hold of Darbaridas's line, Shambhu became adorned as a court singer.

As in a crowd of thousands a person, on seeing the beloved, forgets everything, so Shambhudas, a lover of music, forgot home and family and did not marry. Shambhudas fell beneath a collapsing order.

As the old order continued to collapse, Mithila's art too, like Mithila's own soil, became scattered, disordered, broken and torn. ❑

The Gallows

Tomorrow at twelve o'clock, Baldev will be hanged. The radio and the newspapers have carried the news to every ear. As Baldev knows it, so do the jail authorities. As Baldev's family knows it, so do society, friends and well-wishers. Everyone's mind is fixed upon twelve o'clock. That same twelve o'clock, whether of day or night, takes hold of the road towards the open field of all directions in its fiercest form.

Cell No. 1 of the jail: the cell given to a condemned prisoner after the court has fixed the date of hanging. The structure of this cell is different from that of other cells and wards. In any case, the structure of a cell is strange, but this one is certainly separate from the rest. It is a small chamber shaped like a cell, a room within the narrow sphere of a room. There is one kind of room that is made inside a large house, and another kind that itself is called a house. The first-number cell is made in that way. Its walls are built of first-grade chimney bricks, the hardened sand of the sone river between Kiul and Lakhisarai, and a mixture of sand and cement. It is a cell of barely seven square feet, smaller even than a small room inside a house. In front is a doorway of one and three-quarter feet, not a door-window through which one may move in and out. An iron door is fixed there. In the remaining walls, there is neither window nor opening, nor any other means of seeing east or west. Even in places where everything is present for the sense of direction, direction sometimes gets

confused, and one begins to take east for west and west for east.

For the last fifteen days, the full play of life has been taking place for Baldev in that little cell-like room. Before that, he had been living in the seventh-number cell for three years. Yet after coming to the first-number cell, Baldev had certainly received this much comfort: the food was better than before, and the bedding and covering were better. Though there was neither an electric wire nor a bulb inside the cell, a bulb was hung directly in front of the door, so that some light reached inside. A special guard had also been posted outside the cell.

The bell of twelve at night sounded on the tower's parapet. The time had come for night and day to change dice. It was the very moment where past changes into present, and present into future, where night takes the road of day. But the ghostly force of that hour was so strong that it grew still fiercer. Just as a child born at night belongs to the day, so Baldev's night too had become day. Whether night had turned into day, or whether the goddess of sleep herself had fled in fear with Vighnavadini, disturbing spirit, who can say?

Lying on the bedding, Baldev rose and sat up, then began to look at the four walls of the cell. In the darkness, everything seemed lost. Even the electric light outside had wrapped itself in a sheet of darkness and had become such that it could hardly see its own measure. At last Baldev looked towards his own body. Hand could not see hand. Then, feeling his way, he crawled towards the gate of the room. Stretching out his hand, he understood that this was the gate of the room. Seeing the gate of the room, faith rose in Baldev's mind that from here he would see everything of darkness and light. Gathering courage, he looked towards the bulb hanging from the electric pole. It was a dying light. Around it countless mosquitoes and flies were dancing, ready to lose their lives. On the pole, clusters of lizards sat with mouths open, ready to eat. Below, groups of frogs were jumping. Meanwhile, swarms of mosquitoes, singing their song, crossed the gate and entered inside. But Baldev's attention did not go to the mosquitoes. As, when the body is full of many diseases, the

greater disease presses down the smaller ones, so Baldev's larger suffering suppressed the mosquitoes' feast outside. How could it not? Where the blood of human life has no value, how much blood can mosquitoes drink? More than that, something awakened in Baldev's mind: when I am ending at twelve o'clock, if in the meantime even a little good is done for another, that too is dharma, is it not?

Just then, pressing their feet softly, a group of guards began to circle the cell from all sides. Everything was lost in darkness. From the sound of their feet, Baldev understood. Just as cows and buffaloes recognise the gait of human beings, dogs and cats even in darkness, so Baldev recognised it. But all were silent. A thought rose in Baldev's mind: since I shall climb the gallows at twelve, why is so much guarding needed? First of all, the jail is already built within high walls. Inside that are the wards and cells. Within all that, what need is there for such guard and watch? But immediately his thought changed. Prisoners of the wards keep coming and going. Every day two or four arrive and two or four leave. But now I shall not be able to leave or is life itself coming to an end? Raising his eyes, Baldev looked ahead and felt that there was no question of years or months; he existed only for a few hours. The day the court gave the order of hanging, why was the hanging not carried out that very day? Why has he been kept alive for fifteen days to see and suffer unnecessary grief and anguish? He calmed his mind. As soon as it grew calm, as east and west winds stir the deep water of a pond, so in Baldev's trembling mind rose the question: why will there be hanging? As his gaze stopped upon the question, another rose: Both the worthy and the unworthy mount the gallows. Then what am I among them?

As the wind falls before a storm rises and the atmosphere becomes still, so Baldev's mind grew still. No wave of any kind remained. But at once another thought rose: I have reached the final boundary of life. Just as, after crossing the boundary of one village, another village begins, so I shall go from the world of life to the world of death. But this much will surely happen: until now life has had an address; afterwards I shall reach the addressless. Then another

thought rose: the world of life is not merely the world of death. Life too is a world. As an animal that has fled one forest, on reaching the boundary of another, raises its eyes all around to see whether it is fit to live in or not, so Baldev's mind stopped at the boundary of life and death. As a stream flowing across the earth from one direction to another blocks the road, so the current of life blocked Baldev.

Seeing no hope of crossing ahead, Baldev thought of taking either the left or the right direction. On one side a stream rises from the mountain, crosses the earth and meets the sea; on the other too, it crosses the earth and meets the sea. Ahead, only a few hours remain, but behind lies the whole of life. Is one hanging alone the hanging, or is the noose of a life already caught in the noose the real gallows? Baldev's mind stopped. But immediately the thought rose that it was not good to pass the time in silence. The bell of twelve had rung quite some time ago. As a child born upon the earth slowly grows strong, so Baldev's mind too began to grow firm. He remembered the death sentence of fifteen days before. Anger rose in his mind: when the order of hanging had been given, why was there then fifteen days of jail again? For what crime was this fruit given? If he had been hanged that very day, the grief and anguish of these fifteen days would not have been there. Not only that, why did they increase the burden upon themselves for nothing?

Then a thought rose: I am entangling myself without reason. He calmed his mind. As soon as it grew calm, another thought sprang up: shall I leave the world as a good son or as a bad son? Some leave the world swelling and blooming, and some leave it wailing and drowning. But the one who leaves it swelling and blooming, does he truly leave it? He catches the living soul in such a way that even if one tries to release it, it does not leave. But I am not that. Then his mind turned again. The world is very large, and very small. But the world seems large to the one who longs even for a bari, a small dish in the middle of a feast. Yet bari is neither the final stage of a feast nor the final fulfilment of a home. It is the middle of the feast and the middle of the home. Then why should one wish to obtain it?

Baldev's mind stopped again. It is not good for a dog to bark without reason. I too have a world of my own. In it are sky and netherworld, moon and sun, river and lake, everything. Then to leave one's own and look at another's world would mean going away from oneself, would it not? It would be proper to understand the essence of one's own karma and one's own dharma. Until I understand that and enter the stage of the world, I shall be like a man who runs after the cry that a crow has taken his ear, without first touching his own ear. As soon as his own stage and his own acting came near, Baldev's mind stopped and stood still. The moment it stood still, a thought rose of its own. Acting too, for the viewer and for the world, is of many colours, of many levels. Yet it is called acting. Some perform by creating leela, some perform while humming. Some perform in silence, some in the passion of love. How can these be separated? On one side, strange and beautiful pictures are made; on the other, ugly pictures too are made.

Baldev's entangled mind suddenly flared up. If he kept entangling himself for nothing, time would slip away. The time left was like counted morsels and measured broth; to keep it in confusion would not be good. The twelve o'clock bell had rung long before. If he had had a watch in his hand, he would have known the exact time, but that too was not there. The day he entered jail, they had taken it from him at the jail gate. They would return it the day he came out. But when would he come out? Today he would hang upon the gallows and immerse his life. Then how would he take the watch, wear it and know the time? Well, does morning not come in a village where there is no hen? Five or ten minutes this way or that, one can still guess. But the experience of time that moves with work and the experience of time without work are certainly different. The experience of work's running is better, because time walks close to work. But I do not even have that. I eat only twice, and lie stretched like a pole. When I am awake and when I am asleep, not to speak of others, I myself do not understand. Regret will bring nothing.

Then the question rose in his mind: "Why the gallows?"

After remaining silent for some time, a thought rose unbidden in Baldev's mind: if time had passed in devotion, I would have climbed smiling and happy. Since I did not do that, I shall climb wailing and crying. As knowledge is the source of strength, is not labour the source of devotion? Then his mind stopped. If labour is the source of devotion, then I too am surely a labourer. If I were not, how did I play such a game?

Restless and troubled, the words came out of Baldev's mouth:

"That much I certainly did."

A thought rose: one sweat drips in breaking stone; another drips in making stone. Yes, in both cases sweat drips. But is the sweetness of both the same? It is not. Then what shall be called labour and service? Again Baldev stopped, raised his eyes again and again, and looked alertly all around. But in the darkness he could see nothing. The thought rose: I am wandering after labour for nothing. The time that has gone will not return. Now I have come to the last edge of life. I am neither a true labourer nor a creator of useful labour. I am wandering needlessly after others. Everyone has his own life and his own place, and each is always affected by time and nature. Therefore, as a person understands his own matter, another will not understand it in the same way.

Wandering and circling from all sides, Baldev's mind returned to himself. Anger rose within him. This is the very mind whose deeds make one person God and another a killer, one who is hanged before the eyes of the world. But whom shall I tell, and who will listen? His mind stopped. Who is a murderer, what is murder, and who creates it? Just as, when flies and mosquitoes are few, one is not troubled as much while eating and sleeping as when they are many, so Baldev's mind again became entangled. As soon as the knot loosened, he began to feel shame before himself. I too am among the criminals chosen out by the world. All my life I remained ruined within myself, but where did I understand that I had remained ruined? As the power of creation weakens when the earth is ruined, so it happened with me too. His mind overflowed. Crying out, he said: "I am a criminal. I

have committed crime. Along with robbery, I have committed murder. Should I not be hanged now?"

As a father's affection for his son begins to lessen from the very day he sees him moving from worthiness towards unworthiness, so Baldev's grieving soul began to move away from his mind, and his mouth burst open without direction:

"I am a criminal. I committed crime. Not one crime, but many. Not one day, but throughout life. My hanging is taking place very late. It should have happened long ago. But why did it not?"

As if a curtain suddenly fell across Baldev's mouth, his surging mind moved backwards. Hinging is the fruit of the final murder and robbery; but what of all else that I did throughout my life?

As a bath in the Madhyamas, extra month is more beautiful and cooler than a bath in other months, so Baldev's mind stopped among the crimes of his life. On one side was life, on the other crime. In his cooled and quiet mind arose the question: was I born only to become a criminal, that I spent the life of a criminal? But where did I understand that I was committing crime, that I was becoming a criminal? Straightening his tangled mind, Baldev began to remember one day after another, one event after another from his life. The words came out of his mouth:

"How can another know as much of my life as I hold in my own mind? I have not only committed murder and looting; I have also violated the sacred bond by which women are regarded as mothers and sisters."

His mind cried out in anguish:

"I deserve hanging not once, but a thousand times."

Baldev's mind began to grow restless. For whom did I do it? As soon as this question rose, his attention moved towards his family. On the final day, he would see his wife and son. They would surely come anxiously to meet him. But would the meeting be as it used to be in the family? How could it be? I shall remain surrounded by guards, and they will stand aside at a distance.

His mind turned. Why would anyone come to meet me for nothing? What face would they see, and what face would I show? Better that I remain lost, and they too remain lost. The world will recognise and know them. If society points its finger at them, they will leave that society and move into another. The moment someone goes from one society into another, the bond of the previous society breaks. A society formed within a bond thinks of its own interest. But society is an ocean, in which there are shells and small shells as well as monitor lizards and crocodiles.

Baldev's mind began to stop. As, through many births, or by the force of evil custom and evil time, even a guava plant born under the shade of bamboo finds its time and comes into bloom, so Baldev's mind bloomed in pain. Not like the sorrow of parents when a mirror falls from an innocent child's hand, yet like someone trying to pick up and join its pieces one by one, such a feeling sprang up in Baldev's wounded mind. It had been three years since he had come to jail. He had been caught from home at night and brought to jail at gunpoint. New people, new places had come before him.

Just as people of the country and of Mithilanchal, sitting in different corners of the world, remember their former families, so Baldev's family too came into his mind. But at once the family of the jail came forward. He had been enclosed after crossing one gate and then another. With the search, everything had been enclosed. It had not come from outside; he himself had been enclosed. Yet even there he had met new faces. As soon as he entered, in the ward, he received a welcome of fists and blows. As the strength of a wrestler drains away when he steps into the arena, so his own strength drained away. For the first time in his life, he saw jail.

After that welcome, he was taken to the met, the convict ward-leader. When the arena changes, the wrestler's strength too changes. As soon as his name was entered in the register of the convict-head, many orders rose together: duty for sweeping, duty for carrying water to the latrine, and so on. Just as his mind was being pressed down under the burden of work, the head convict, sprawling on his cushion,

ordered: “Come here. First massage me; the other work will come later.”

His mind, caught in misfortune, became a little light. Happiness rose within him: had they twisted his ear even a little more, the ear itself would have been torn off. If life is saved, a hundred thousand remedies remain. As he turned to one side, the head’s man said:

“It is your first day. Today you will not get food.”

As eighty maunds of fuel may rise to ninety upon a corpse, so the burden rose upon him. He could not even protest. Yet he found patience in this much: even if they would not give him food, at least he had found a place to sleep. Meanwhile the head’s man threw another order:

“In what case have you come?”

Hearing the name of the case, his mind became a swamp. It was like the moment when one sheds tears in grief and pain and offers consolation to someone. A sprout of hope for release from jail awoke. He said quickly:

“Sarkar, robbery and murder together.”

Hearing “murder along with robbery”, the head’s mind stopped. This man would be a companion for many days. Better to make friendship with him. Still lying there, he ordered:

“Give the new prisoner food and a place to sleep.”

As the happiness of life comes in eating and sleeping, so the hope of sleep brought joy to his mind. As soon as joy sprang up, the mind began to wander. In the meantime, words broke from the head’s mouth:

“You have a bottle of oil, do you not? From tomorrow, bring it from the storehouse.”

At the mention of the storehouse, murmuring began in the ward.

“How can a new prisoner be allowed to go to the storehouse!”

"Yes! This is injustice."

Meanwhile, one prisoner asked the Thekedar, the prisoner-contractor who controlled supplies:

"What is the matter, Thekedar Bhaiya? Why have you become so restless?"

The contractor said:

"You will not understand these twists and turns yet."

"Why not, Bhaiya? When people hear something, they may hear it or not hear it. When people are made to understand something, they may understand it or not understand it. First speak, then we shall see."

"You fool, it is not good to speak every matter everywhere. Good can become bad, and bad can become good."

"Try it once and see. Even in hell you are pushing and jostling. Outside, when a person does something, he comes inside, he comes to jail. But where will he go from here? Speak. What do you think, that I have come here just like that, or that I have done something and come?"

Seeing the contractor's companion grow bold, the head laughed harshly and said:

"What is it, Thekedarwa? What bomb are you holding? Speak."

On one side, the contractor's decreasing income danced in his mind; on the other stood the head's order. Slipping close, the contractor came near and whispered:

"Met Bhaiya, what can remain hidden from you? You know that I save a little money and send it to the village."

The contractor's words did not cool the fire in the head's mind; rather they struck it like a gust of wind. A thought rose: ten rogues together make a mahant; without that, even a solitary Thursday is false. As rose-red turns into hibiscus-red, as aprajita changes colour and becomes white or black, as in the play of day and night full moon

becomes new moon and new moon becomes full moon, so a tide of life began to rise in Baldev's mind. Yet as fire without fuel, thirst without water, or a farmer without a field, though possessing strength, becomes powerless, so life is kept asleep. But the question too is strange. Good food and good sleep are the main gates of the god Indra's throne; then life?

Sleep too is an essential element of life. Then how did it become bad? But when the burden is to sweep and clean ten rooms, sweeping only one room is not right either. The head's mind stopped. He saw no path ahead, and turning back did not seem good. Again the thought rose: just as some become yogis through yogic practice and lose themselves in yoga, and some become men of pleasure and lose themselves in enjoyment, so some become trapped in work too. But when one becomes unfit through work, one becomes disabled as well. Where the healthy are offered in sacrifice, who asks about the disabled?

Emotionally stirred, the convict-head tried to bring balance and said:

"Baua Thekedar, this is the play of the world. We taste bitter and sweet inside the jail, while others play openly under the open earth and sky. Now you tell me, what would be good?"

As there are many thieves, many kinds of thieves, so too there are many thieves of one colour. The contractor became entangled like something caught in amti thorns. If a thief steals and brings something, then gives it to the needy, what should he be called? Is theft only that in which one quietly brings something and quietly keeps it, so that no one comes to know and one keeps smiling within? Seeing the contractor silent, the convict-head asked:

"Thekedar, why are you silent? I leave it to you. Whatever you say, that is what I shall do. Until love moves with love, soul with soul, and mind with mind, where will affection find its full adornment?"

Pressed for an answer, the contractor's mind could not hold back. He said: "Met Bhai, when I already send you oil by the kilo,

why did you tell the new prisoner to go to the storehouse?"

"Baua, I saw the oil in the little vessel almost exhausted. That is why the words came out."

Seeing his side becoming stronger, happiness grew in the contractor's mind. Happily he said:

"It is not good to send a man straight to the storehouse on the very day he has entered jail. How will we know at once whether he is a thief or a chhulah, a slippery rogue? Since the storehouse is in my hands, you will not face any shortage. Is that not so?"

Hearing the contractor's words, the met's (convict-head's) mind became entangled like a fish caught in a net. A thief is a thief, but what is a chhulah, a slippery rogue? Yet being the met, it was not good to ask. The very man in whose hands everything lay, would he not understand? The met's mind began to whirl. I have been in jail for so many days; by the contractor's reckoning, the number of such slippery rogues is not small. Yet I myself did not understand. How did that happen?

Turning the word another way, the met said:

"How many kinds of chhulah might there be in jail, Thekedar?"

Feeling himself like Narad reporting the earth to the heavens, the contractor said:

"Bhai Saheb, this is such a tangled question that it will slip away if answered in haste. It must be examined carefully. In five or seven days I shall tell you fully."

The first day of jail began to dance in Baldev's mind. Then another thought rose: I am in this world only for a few hours; it is not good to remain enclosed within the work of a single day. But to whom shall I say this, and who will listen?

As the mind moved ahead, another thought rose: whatever a person does in life, whether others see and understand it or not, the doer certainly sees it and understands it. Shame began to rise within

him. As circles form within circles under the force of falling rain, so the movement of life's turning wheel began to gather in Baldev's mind. What a heavy criminal I am, that I have become a burden upon the earth. If a criminal like me is not hanged, that too would be unjust.

His mind became unsteady. It is human beings who become both human and demon. On this stage of the world, some play their part as heroes and some as cowards.

The mind stopped. Then it rose again: I had come to lift the burden of this earth, and I became a burden upon the same earth. Why did this happen? Was it that I did not move my hands and feet throughout life? No, that is not true. I have kept moving my hands and feet. Then why did I become a burden? His mind became fixed. Today it certainly seems that, throughout life, I moved in the opposite, loveless direction and caught hold of the wrong path. But on that day, where did I understand whether it was the wrong path or the right path? Where did any obstacle arise in the work? As the current of a stream rushes from the head towards the lower channel, but to move from the lower channel towards the head it has to face resistance. Water itself keeps stopping water. Yet somewhere there is a point where the water of the head and the water below stop one another, and there it begins to stand. It keeps standing until it rises above the stream and begins to spread over the earth. But on the earth too, direction keeps being obstructed. What I could not understand till today, how shall I understand by myself now? But no, at the final edge of life, even if I cannot understand everything, I am certainly beginning to understand something new. If not, why did I never understand that hanging would come? Not only I, many others live by the same tendency, but are all of them hanged? Where small parts become the limbs of a human being, and every limb has its qualities and faults, how can all be joined and made to move? Finding the right time, someone begins to run; finding bad time, someone grows exhausted. To become a whole human being is not a child's toy. One has to become, and be made, according to time. If not, why do people get ground down in the friction?

Baldev forgot the hanging at twelve o'clock. His mind moved forward. There, most flowers were of many colours. Though fragrance, form and shape may be alike, they are both favourable and unfavourable to one another. Just as rose and red become light red and deep red, so too aprajita becomes black and white. And if black colour climbs upon white, as one climbs upon another? Perhaps the land-lotus turns from white to red, but not everything is a land-lotus.

Just as, after walking through a flower garden, fruit garden or bamboo grove, one feels like sitting in shade, so it happened with Baldev too. Seeing the scene of the world, his mind began to grow green. But who will give it here? From whom shall I ask? Even if I ask, there is no guarantee that what is given will be good. People call even bad things good.

For ages there have been trees of many-coloured flowers and fruits, yet they are still being lost, and they continue to be lost. Perhaps this very game of losing and winning goes on.

Baldev began to doubt himself. I am now in the jail cell; at the appointed hour I shall mount the gallows. Is my mind breaking apart? A broken mind is called mad. But even without breaking, people call one mad. As a sickle becomes blunt in the friction of paddy and rabi crops, so Baldev's mind grew blunt. After some time passed, the thought rose: after today, who will remember me? Is it only I who have received the death sentence, or do others receive it too? Some die by falling from a tree; some by drowning in water; some by drinking poisonous medicine; some by the bite of a venomous snake. But I am different from all of them. I am a criminal among the people of the world, such a criminal that the world spits upon and drives away.

Baldev felt the pain of the swelling wind within his mind. For whom did I commit so many crimes? For myself or for my family? Today who will climb the gallows with me? If I did it for myself, do I not have hands and feet? Suddenly a cool sea breeze struck his mind. As soon as it struck, words began to come from his mouth:

"What kind of hanging is the one that a man, smiling, places around his own neck with his own hands, and then keeps smiling before the people? And what kind of hanging is the one at which people spit and close their eyes? Some mount the gallows as noble sons and light an immortal flame; some remain blinded in a blackened light. On this earth no one goes with anyone. Everyone remains behind his own self-interest."

The mind stopped. In that stopped mind rose the thought: how does no one go? Soul certainly goes with soul; likewise good goes with good and bad with bad.

It was the last watch of the night. On one side night was being emptied out; on the other, day was beginning to rise. Half-conscious Baldev's awareness opened when, in the darkness, a paurki, lost till then, called out to mark its presence among its companions. Then, from one village to another, from one tree to many kinds of trees, all in their own excited voices gave a call of unity:

"This is the very time when the moon deceived Rishi Gautam. Whatever curse Gautam gave, this much certainly happened: he fell from the soul into the world of the body. When an eclipse falls upon the moon, who will recognise whom on earth in the darkness?"

Hearing the voices of the paurkis, a thin arrival of light came into Baldev's mind, like the morning star which, though there are other stars, brings a red glow to the earth and tries to illumine it with a smile. As soon as light arrived, the thought rose: is it only I who will be hanged, or has hanging been happening from the beginning and will it continue in the future too? But in my life, when did I catch the path that leads to the gallows?

Baldev turned back and began to think: I caught the path to the gallows on the very day I left the road and took the cattle track. A road has limits and boundaries; it reaches from a fixed place to a fixed place. But a cattle track is not like that. It keeps wandering and circling. A human being has a road; the cattle track belongs to animals, by which they go into the forest to graze. Did I too become

an animal? But animals live, and human beings too live. In both, the soul resides. Yet even with the soul residing in it, an animal cannot understand that the soul dwells within it. That is not so with man. Man not only loves living creatures; he also receives love from them. Not only that, he becomes a companion and gives support in life, and expects support too. If this were not so, why would animals not be able to arrange their own dwelling? The life of one that cannot arrange its dwelling, what guarantee can it have? It may fill its belly by wandering and searching for grass, leaves or other food, but it cannot guarantee the living of life as a human being can. Man can bring water from the underworld and drink it; he can produce food from the earth. Then the mind stopped. Thinking ended. The power of thought halted.

As a traveller stops on seeing a road cut or broken, wondering how he will cross to the other side, so it was. But even breaking and cutting are of many kinds. One kind of break is filled with water, mud and sludge; another remains dry, and with care one can climb down and cross it. The same is true of waterlogged and dry places. Somewhere the water is fathomless, somewhere shallow. Where it is shallow, crossing may be a little difficult, yet it can be done.

But in the unfathomable, the possibility of sinking and being buried is always there. They will hang me, press my neck and take my life. But people die by putting the noose on themselves too. Such circumstances are created that, helpless, a person places the noose around his own neck and loses his life. Is he a criminal, or is he receiving the punishment of a criminal? If he is not a criminal, why did he receive a criminal's punishment? Why does the tiger or lion of the forest take another's life and drink blood? What fault is its own? Only this, that before it the other is prey. Then the mind stopped. Some drown in wells and ponds, some burn in fire; likewise some die in water, stone and storm. Not only that, some fall from trees and die, while some fall and die while climbing up or down a tree. Nature's play is wondrous. At every moment, every instant, it both shows the path and pushes downward. By making the gulf of above and below,

it has made the boundary between life and death.

Fire is already filled with fire, water with water, air with air. How then will one recognise? The kind of light of the eyes needed for recognition is neither in the blackened cloud, which will soak everything with rain, nor in the cracked earth, which has struck its own layers so hard that it has made them powerless. Where is milk in the breast of a dried mother, that even if she wishes, the poor woman can give it? Even in a dark night, when hand cannot see hand, when even one's own body is lost and all the limbs of the body become inactive, still something remains that, by feeling and groping, carries one a little distance. But I have gone completely blind. As drinking water, once stale, is thrown away, so today I am being thrown away from the world.

As soon as his eyes fell upon his own discarded life, Baldev's mind trembled. He could neither see the path ahead nor slip back behind. As a man, surrounded on all sides by enemies at a turn of life, cannot calculate defeat or victory, so Baldev too was surrounded. Even if he accepted defeat, he would lose his life at the enemy's hands; then it was not proper to keep attachment to life and accept defeat. Better that, while facing them, however long he could stand before them, that much of life would still have some value.

But who can remain standing? One whose body has been made hollow and worn by diseases like tuberculosis or cancer, how can he stand? Where is the strength in his legs that will keep him upright? Baldev's mind became disturbed.

After a few moments, a thought rose: hanging is like the deep central pit of life's pond. Some dive into the unfathomable water, bring out mud, and place it upon the rim of the pit; others slip at the edge, slide and slide, sink into the deep water, rot there and spread the smell of decay. But what is understood at the final edge of life? At least if I had done it for myself, why would I cry? Why would I not leave the world laughing? Where did I understand the unfailing remedy of life?

The sun had risen. Baldev's wife, Kamini, and his son, Sushil, sat silent, each engaged in their own work, yet a strange condition remained within their minds. Neither the son said anything to the mother, nor the mother to the son. The hanging of Baldev kept pulling at both their minds from within. Because of this, the pain of the mind kept growing. Mental pain keeps growing until it is taken out and told to another. Just then a crow cawed in the sky. To Kamini, the crow's call seemed inauspicious, but to Sushil it seemed auspicious. Breaking the silence, Kamini said:

"Baua, how hollow and ominous the crow's voice sounded!"

Of course, both knew about Baldev's hanging, yet Kamini spoke so to deceive and console her mind. Sushil understood his mother's pain, but in life, sorrow and pain come and go in this way. Whether the pain is the smallest or the greatest, people move forward with time. Slowly, decreasing little by little, it fades away. Just as a road is needed for walking, whether good or bad, society too is such an ocean in which crores and arabs (millions and billions) of living creatures live freely. Though they may block one another's paths, catch and eat one another, still they live there. Good or bad, human beings live among human beings.

Sushil sensed his mother's pain. In his mind he thought: first, the poor woman is losing the companion of a lifetime; over that, if I too speak in the same way, her heart will receive a further blow. When wound falls upon wound, the pain becomes greater. But just as a person drinks water when bitterness catches the throat and reduces the bitterness, if I try to reduce the pain, then the pain will either stop where it is or lessen, instead of moving forward.

Gathering himself, Sushil answered his mother:

"Ma, the crow sounded beautiful to me. Where did it caw harshly?"

Hearing Sushil's words, Kamini said:

"On other days, how beautifully it brings out its early morning voice. Today it gave such a restless, scratching call."

Sushil understood the pain in his mother's heart. True, there is no fathoming the human heart. On one side, like a tuft of cotton, it flies even without wind; on the other, it endures the death of a young husband, of an earning young son. Whether the road is broken or cut, whether the pit is small or large, a road is still needed for walking. Life does not move by sitting in one place. Some remedy or another has to be found. Somewhere people leap across the pit; somewhere they cut or scrape earth from the side and make it passable. Sometimes, when the break or cutting is too large, people leave it and make another path.

Seeing that his mother's pain was not lessening, Sushil thought: even with one clod at a time, the pit of a road can be filled; according to the size of the pit, one may cut proper earth and fill it too. Sushil said:

"Ma, I found a good omen in the crow's call. Just as someone feels sorrow when a thing is lost, the one who finds it feels joy too. The thing in between remains one and the same. The same matter or object may be good for one and bad for another. A protector of life may be a husband, and may be a son too. Though the work is one, there is always some difference in the way both do it. It is that difference which creates distance between one and another."

Sushil's thought stood face to face before Kamini's thought, and Kamini's thought stopped. When the body suddenly stands, a rush comes through it; the same rush came to Kamini. As the rush came, her mind trembled. Trembling, her gaze began to divide: on one side towards her husband, on the other towards her son. The shade under which she had lived till now was breaking. Her mind began to despair, but at once, seeing her son before her, hope awakened. A son too is a guard like a husband. In the bend of Kamini's despair, hope found support. Her heart shivered. As it shivered, love for her son awakened. Not the love that a son has in the hope of his mother, but the love in whose hope a mother lives under the shelter of her son. Just as a drop of water forms from water and a drop of dew from dew, and then again creates water or dew, so

it was. In Kamini's despairing mind, happiness began to flow. As it flowed, her mind bloomed like an opening bud. As maize or paddy grains in the earthen pan burst one by one and change colour, so the colour of Kamini's mind began to change. Why do people say that a seed sprouts only when it receives a favourable atmosphere? For a seed, that very atmosphere becomes favourable which belongs to the root of that seed and the plant of that seed. If not, then on one side, in the unfathomable water of the sea, seeds sprout and give birth to water-plants; on the other, they sprout amid earth and water too. Why only that? Even in cracked sand and split stone, some seed or another of some plant surely sprouts. When power is present everywhere in the world, why should the land of Mithila become powerless, unable to protect even a span-long stomach? The earth that can make a beggar into a bhikshu, a man of pleasure into a yogi, why can it not make a yogi into a man of pleasure and a bhikshu into a beggar?

A new strength had already risen in Kamini's mind. Her mind had split into two halves like a popped grain of paddy. As in the earthen pan, the grain becomes one half, two halves, three halves, and then wishes to fly out of the pan, and does fly, so Kamini's thought flew. But the words of her mouth dried up, and the thirst of her throat began to increase. Finding herself in the current flowing between husband and son, Kamini's heart writhed. As it writhed, she fixed her eyes into her son's eyes and said:

"Bau Sushil! Today, your father must be trembling in the last moments of his last day. Shall we both go and meet him once?"

Hearing his mother's words, Sushil's mind stopped. In one person's mind flowers rain; in another's, hail made of water and stone falls. Yet as both die, both also live. Mother is asking to go and meet him, but would that be right? If we go, will he receive something, or will we receive something? The benefit of the setting sun is received by the one that is rising. For one that is not rising, day and night are the same; then what is the value of sunset? He will receive nothing except what he is already receiving: that he is going to the gallows for himself, and for the family? If for the family, then can a family

run on bad deeds and not on good deeds? If it can run, then he himself left the good path, walked the bad path, and is now showing the final sight. What final sight? This only: that he came weeping upon the earth and will leave laughing, or that as he came weeping, so he will leave weeping. Shall such a life be called a fulfilled life? Never. The moment we step out of the house, people will speak and spit, saying: look at the wife and son of the murderer and sinner! How shamelessly they are walking with such pride!

Answering his mother's question, Sushil said:

"Ma, with what face shall we go to see him, and what face shall we show? If we stand before him, Father will say only this, that he is going for us. But what shall we ask him?"

Sushil's thought rose in Kamini's mind like a guardian. As a creeper of a hundred hands cannot rise from the ground without support, so it is with a woman too. Was it not by striking the waist that even the Creator made the law? Seeing the support of her son, hope for the next life had already awakened in Kamini's mind. Overwhelmed, she said:

"Son, if you have come upon the earth as a son, then keep walking as a son. Now everything is you. Widowhood will place only one restraint upon me. But we shall move through the rest of life together, will we not? Whatever your thought will be, that will be my thought too. However it may be, you are the male branch of the line. Whatever I may be, I shall remain only within the house."

Did Sushil's heart melt on hearing his mother's words? He became aware of his responsibility. But at once his mind grew blunt. On one side he saw his mother, guileless as the earth; on the other, his father, a wrongdoer, a criminal, a sinful soul of the earth. The heat of his mind towards his father grew sharp. He said:

"Ma, on the day when the great burden of the family is being lifted..."

Sushil's speech stopped. Seeing Sushil in astonishment, Kamini said: "Do not grieve. Whatever destiny belonged to that day

has happened. As burnt and dead earth, receiving the drops of Adra, becomes not only alive but also creative, so you are naturally a man. Who will say what to whom, and who will hear whose words? But as he is your father, so he is my husband too. Therefore, in the final hour, remember him with reverence and then forget him. Come, let us sit on the verandah of the courtyard, make tea, drink it, and talk. Let the world say whatever it likes, but seeing your face I feel such happiness as I have never felt in life."

Hearing his mother's words, Sushil's mind fluttered just as harsh speech flutters in the mouth of an excited person. He said:

"Ma, living life is not very impossible, but it is not very easy either."

Hearing her son's hope-filled words, Kamini's heart melted. She said: "Baua, now you are not merely a boy; you have become a son. Seeing and examining your father's deeds, you have become a soldier who will walk with the world, a doer of the deeds of family and society. Neither does one gain knowledge by merely reading another, nor is another's knowledge always wholly proper for oneself. Therefore, judging your own time and situation, the burden of carrying the family forward has come upon your head. What kind of human being you become and how you bear the earth, that itself is the test of life."

Between mother and son, amid talk of life and family, Kamini's mind sometimes slipped away from her husband, yet immediately returned and caught hold of him again. When it moved away from him, she began to look closely at her own hands and feet, and at Sushil too. A thought rose in her mind: even a dragonfly has wings and flies in the sky, but that does not make it a bird. For a bird, there must be strength in the wings; where is that in a dragonfly? The slightest thing happens and its wings break; then even flying in the sky ends. So has our family become now. I am of age, yet outside the house I have done nothing; and Sushil naturally has never understood any burden. The reason I did not step outside was that I kept myself within the boundary of the house. That was proper too, and improper

too. Being the other half, I should have been acquainted with all the tendencies of life. That did not happen. Had it happened, I would certainly have thought about good and bad tendencies. But nothing will come from regret. She said:

"Son, if you have come to this earth as a son, then do something and show it. If not, what is the value of being a son?"

Hearing his mother's words, Sushil's mind sprouted in a new form like a fresh, tender shoot. Fixing his eyes into his mother's eyes, he said:

"Ma, in this world everyone builds life with his own fate and destiny. As the path of one's life is, so one lifts that burden and walks."

Hearing Sushil's words, Kamini grew emotional and said:

"Son, just as one son destroys a family and lineage already made, so too a son can lift up and make stand a fallen and broken family."

As one who sits beneath the wish-fulfilling tree keeps wandering in mind, so the minds of Baldev's family, while he was going to the gallows, kept wandering. When a corpse is taken to the cremation ground, those carrying wood behind it keep saying, "Ram nam sat hai, sabko yahi gat hai." But even while returning, when the corpse is no longer there, they say the same: "Ram nam sat hai, sabko yahi gat hai." Perhaps at the courtyard of death, after touching iron and stone and fire, people forget it or leave it behind. Where from child to elder such a mantra is chanted, why is the condition of life there like this? As a madman walking on a road sometimes moves away from the road, sometimes clings close to it and shouts, and sometimes grows still and dumb, so the minds of mother and son, Sushil and Kamini, just before the father and husband's hanging, kept pulling east and west like a rope in a tug of war. Kamini said:

"Son, in a family of three, one is ending, yet two of us remain. As soon as you marry, we shall again become three."

Hearing his mother's words, Sushil said: "Families have

always increased and decreased in this way, and will continue to do so. Why beat one's head over it? Then one thing must be understood: who else will carry the burden of another's family? One has to carry the burden of one's own family oneself."

Kamini said:

"Yes, you have said this well."

Sushil said:

"Whether in sorrow or in happiness, the burden of a family has to be carried by the people of the family itself."

Hearing Sushil's words, Kamini's mind trembled. The son was naturally inexperienced; she herself had never understood any burden. Then? Her speech stopped. As everything within and outside the earth begins to shake during an earthquake, so Kamini's inner and outer being began to shake. As the foot trembles while crossing the flowing water of a stream, even after trying to steady itself, so Kamini began to feel. Sushil's mind too became disturbed, but steadying it, he said: "Ma, the question has been left out. Where did you answer it?"

Remembering Sushil's question, Kamini said:

"Having accepted the man as my other half, I could not recognise him. Today I understand that within a man too there is a man, and within a woman too there is a woman. Had I understood this, such distance would not have formed. Of course, within the family, I never neglected the burden that was mine. But what is the remedy now?"

Saying this, Kamini stopped. As the force of river and drain water stops when it finds a dam before it, so it happened with Kamini. Like a fish pierced by an arrow, she began to writhe. In that writhing mind, thoughts began to come: on one side, seekers of truth remain engaged in philosophical reflection and examination; on the other, there is rivalry between person and person. Everyone wishes to move ahead of everyone else. Because of this, walking together is left behind, society becomes fragmented, and between labourer and non-

labourer an immense distance of direction and counter-direction is created.

Both mother and son sat silent for a long time, looking at each other's face. Then, breaking the silence, Sushil said:

"Ma, what is your wish?"

Hearing her son's words, Kamini's mind grew calm. Her husband's hanging moved away from her mind. As if remembering something, she said:

"Son, I have seen much of the world. Nana and Nani, Dada and Dadi, father and mother, Mama and Mami, how much shall I say? When I turn back and look, I see everything; but when I look ahead, I see nothing except you. It feels as though a large tree has fallen and blocked the traveller's road."

Hearing his mother, Sushil said:

"Ma, whatever your wish is, I shall try to fulfil it as far as possible. The one who has left the earth has naturally gone; something will go with him. But the one who remains still has hope."

Taking support in Sushil's hope-filled thought, his mother said: "It is the play of the world that one stands upon another's shadow, and sometimes the shadow spreads towards a hundred directions, and sometimes... Therefore forget everything. Keep yesterday, which has passed, in mind, and raise your hands and feet for the tomorrow that is to come."

As soon as it struck nine, the same restlessness entered the jail as comes after heavy rain or an earthquake. Some guards went to bathe and eat, and some began arranging papers, preparing to leave after ten. Even the colour of the office was different from other days. It was not as it usually was, when one had to stand at the gate for an hour at a time waiting for officers who were absent. The office opened on time. How would it not open? Today Baldev's jail sentence was coming to an end. Hanging belongs to life. Only two guards brought Baldev out of the cell and seated him beneath the agney tree, on the grass, and began to talk. Of them, one became busy

preparing the chillum, while the other began talking with Baldev. But the minds of all three, the two guards and Baldev, wandered and strayed in three directions. The first guard, preparing the chillum, was annoyed with the tobacco seller and cursed him, saying that the scoundrels sprinkle water and bring such freshness even to bad leaves that the buyer thinks the tobacco is excellent. But a face covered with snow-powder shines only as long as its power to shine lasts. Does that mean every face is like that, shining at once, then sinking at once, then vanishing? His anger over tobacco carried the guard forward towards the government. As soon as his gaze fell on the government, he felt like laughing. He began muttering:

"The government too performs a strange juggler's dance. On one side it gives licences for tobacco cultivation and licences for making gutkha, and on the other it calls these the cause of cancer and forbids them."

But immediately his mind turned back upon himself. Thirty years of service income has gone into this very tobacco, ganja and bhang. When I retire and receive half salary, what shall I do? First, nothing will remain in the body for doing another kind of work; there will be shortage of food and drink too. On top of that, old age itself is the root of disease. Sometimes teeth will break, sometimes the light of the eyes will lessen, sometimes the ears will grow deaf, sometimes rheumatism will catch the knees. But when did I think about myself so that I might understand?

The second guard, who sat before Baldev, had his mind wandering elsewhere. Just as, when a bottle of liquor comes before a drunkard, the intoxication of liquor begins to dance within him, so are the moments before death or hanging. Until the hanging, Baldev is a criminal and I am the guard who watches him. But after some time, that is, after twelve o'clock, who knows where each of us will be? If not, then right now I am not a guard, nor is Baldev a criminal. What did Baldev do that he became such a great criminal, and I am his guard?

Baldev's mind, growing desolate, looked at this world as

though a mango tree heavy with fruit had fallen in a gust of storm and turned the water aside. The same was happening to him and to his family. But now there was neither time to think and reflect, nor time to fulfil anything.

All three were absorbed in themselves. Yet just as unknown pilgrims sitting near one another at a sacred place ask one another the reason for coming and also ask about the crowd and confusion of the road, so the second guard broke the silence and asked Baldev:

"Brother, today you will climb the gallows and end your life. But tell me one thing: how did you come, little by little, to deserve such a punishment?"

Hearing the guard's question, Baldev was struck to the core and sank into the ocean of his life. As sound above the water of a pond reaches inside the water, but sound from within the water does not come up, so it happened with Baldev. His speech remained shut, but his grieving mind was certainly saying something. Sinking into the ocean of life, Baldev reached that earth of his life where not merely innocence, but sixfold innocence dwelt, just as a child remembers the milk of Chhathi. He remembered the day when he had snatched another child's toy, hidden it away, and his mother too had lied and taken his side. As soon as he remembered it, a glow began to come upon his face like the morning sun. Smiling, he said:

"Guard Bhai, that childhood day is struggling to come out of my mind, so I shall tell that first."

Hearing Baldev's words, the guard's mind too fell upon his own childhood and the children of his family. Like a telescope measuring the road, the two of them began measuring places far and near. Everywhere children appeared. Children ahead, children behind, and between them, his own two children. Both men were lost in a forest of children. As they were lost, both drew a little closer and carried the talk forward.

As sorrow is relieved by both speech and tears, so Baldev, speaking his sorrow, said: "Brother, in childhood I snatched another

child's toy and hid it. Crying, that child went to the courtyard and told his mother. The mother came with the child and asked. I denied it. But I had given it to my mother to keep. My mother too denied it. On the third day, taking that same toy, I went to play in that child's courtyard. Both mother and son recognised it. They said nothing, but they gave me the name 'little thief'."

Hearing Baldev's words, the guard laughed aloud and, pointing towards his companion, said to Baldev:

"Brother, my companion is lost in ganja. Only the two of us remain. Those whose rule and kingdom it is may manage their own affairs. What is that to me? All right, what happened after that?"

Hearing the guard, Baldev fell silent. He remained silent for a while, then said:

"What seemed good that day seems bad today."

Hearing Baldev's answer, the guard was startled and said:

"How so? What do you mean?"

Astonished, Baldev said:

"Brother, the matter did not stop there. It went ahead."

"What went ahead?"

"My mother went to the well to draw water, and that mother and son also came there. Other people too were present. Meanwhile that woman said to my mother, 'Your son stole my son's toy.' As soon as she said this much, it caught like dry straw in the westerly wind. A quarrel began between the two. From quarrel it turned into abuse. As my mother began to dig up seven generations of theirs, so that woman too began digging up ours. Meanwhile, one by one, others too began joining the quarrel. Hearing the noise, more people came. Whoever came joined one side or the other. Dividing into two parties, much abusing and cursing began."

Before Baldev had even finished, the second guard interrupted:

"So much grew from nothing!"

"Did it stop there? It grew further. From both sides, Kamlesari

Mother became the witness, because everyone had become a party to one side or the other and had joined the abuse and quarrel."

Enjoying the story as one enjoys a stuffed betel leaf with the mouth closed, the guard asked:

"Did the quarrel remain only among women, or did it move ahead?"

Hearing the guard's question, Baldev said:

"Is there any real difference between men and women? Men no longer remain like men, and women no longer remain like women. Men have caught hold of womanly ways and become women, and women have caught hold of manly ways and become men. The abuse from women's mouths came into the mouths of men. Just as one spoonful of curd turns a seer of milk into curd, and not only one seer but many seers may become curd, in the same way the abuse from women's mouths entered the men."

In the middle, the guard said:

"Then it must have gone from happening to full happening."

Baldev said:

"Yes, and was that all? Women can chant a garland of abuse from morning to evening, but men are not like that. As soon as one or two abuses come from the mouth, the hand begins to rise. And when the hand rises, it will fall upon someone else, will it not? That is what happened."

Sucking the juice of the account, the guard asked:

"Then there must have been a fight?"

The guard's curious question began to excite Baldev. Growing excited, he said:

"Was there only a fight? There was a donkey-kicking kind of fight. But it was not equal on both sides. My clan was large, and within it there were such broad and fierce members that even to look at them was like looking at demons. Their clan was small, fewer in number, so they received more beating."

Balancing the matter, the guard said: "Here there are only two of us; the third is my companion, and he is dazed. Below is the earth and above is the sky. So let us hold a panchayati between the two of us: was it good or bad?"

Hearing the guard's words, Baldev moved ahead and said:

"Have you already become impatient? The panchayati will be held later. The water has not even been strained yet."

Hearing Baldev, the guard looked at his watch. Waiting is heavy in itself, and waiting inside jail even heavier. Finding time, the guard asked:

"Is there more to the story, Brother?"

Hearing the word "more", Baldev was lost, as a little child is lost in "etcetera and so on". He said:

"Is 'more' only a little thing, that the eyes will run over it at once? There is a great mass. One has to pick from within it, otherwise, like that little child, I shall keep saying 'etcetera, etcetera' all my life and never be able to choose."

Hearing Baldev's steady thought, the guard steadied himself and said:

"All right then. There is still more than two hours."

Hearing "more than two hours", Baldev said:

"In two hours a student passes an examination. If more time than that is spent, he returns with a degree from the board or the university. There is still a great deal of time."

Finding a moment, the guard took matches and cigarettes from his pocket. He pressed one cigarette between his own fingers and gave another to Baldev. He struck the match, lit the cigarettes, and both began to smoke. As smoke came out of both mouths, it mingled so completely that it became impossible to separate one from the other. When the cigarette had settled in his mouth, Baldev said:

"Brother, I am a guest of only a few hours. After that, where you will be and where I will be, who knows? But what is in my heart,

to whom shall I say it? Therefore, as long as we are together, listen. As far as possible, the heart will become a little lighter."

Hearing Baldev's words, the guard said:

"Since I have begun to listen, speak. Whatever you tell, I shall hear it all. And this is a matter of childhood innocence; if we do not listen, who will? After all, we too are guardians."

Smiling, Baldev said:

"I do not remember exactly, but I must have been seven or eight years old."

The guard interrupted:

"Neither seven nor eight; let it be seven and a half. Why be so heated over it?"

Baldev continued:

"I remember very clearly that I would often steal lemons, pomegranates and guava from other people's orchards and bring them home. It was the lemon grove of a neighbour that first gave me a taste for bhang."

Curious, the guard asked:

"How? How?"

Baldev said:

"One neighbour was very skilled in planting orchards and bushes. He remained restless behind that work all day. But he had one good quality too. He neither stopped anyone from entering his orchard, nor allowed anyone who came before him to return empty-handed. Every day I would pluck two lemons from his orchard, sell them at the crossing, and then take bhang and paan. We had no fields enough to live upon, yet seven or eight months somehow passed on the produce from the fields. Babu also cultivated about ten or twelve kathas of sharecropped land. All that together carried the year along. Of course, in the evening, the nonsense I did and spoke made Babu understand that the boy was going astray; his company had gone bad."

The guard asked: "Did Babu say nothing?"

Baldev said: "What could Babu say? I was Mother's darling son. If he ever tried to say anything, Mother would pounce upon him in such a way that his mouth would close. And in the brotherhood too, I was alone, so even there he never wished to say anything too sharply."

The guard asked:

"Then what happened?"

Baldev said:

"One day, a little early in the morning, I swallowed a pressed pellet of bhang, and on top of that I put down a paan filled strongly with hundred-number zarda. By the time I reached home, I was deep in intoxication. Babu was at the darwajja. He said he wanted to ask me one thing. I told him, 'Why one? Ask a thousand.' I too was mounted upon the elephant."

Hearing "mounted upon the elephant", the guard began to laugh. He said:

"And if you had fallen from the elephant, what would have happened?"

Smiling, Baldev said:

"You go too far, Brother. If I had understood that, would I have done all this? That is exactly what I did not understand: how people make one play the game of standing up and sitting down; how one who has fallen thinks he has risen."

The guard asked:

"What did Babu ask?"

Baldev said:

"He asked that somehow or other, through sharecropping and gleaning, grain and water lasted through the year, but there was no fortune of milk and curd. Hearing the names of milk and curd, my own mind brightened. I asked him what he meant. He said he was thinking of taking a buffalo to rear. Now I too had become fit to graze

and tether one."

In between, the guard said:

"He said a very fine thing."

Baldev said:

"Yes, yes. I too liked it. A thought rose in me that just as others have the first right over the first produce of a field or the first fruit of vegetables, so in a family with a cow or buffalo, the children surely have the first claim on everything from darhi to chhalhi, from milk to curd. On top of that, I would make the buffalo my mount and ride through the whole village. Without doing anything, I would still have importance in work. And by hearing little bits from companions, I also knew that the proper diet for users of ganja and bhang is milk and curd. If one does not eat that, the ganja and bhang will eat him instead. Knowingly I was taking bhang, and I was absorbed in that very thing. One who is a worker is absorbed in work; one who is a thinker is absorbed in thought. But I was in none of these. If life does not become a wandering yogi and flowing water, then does it not become stagnant?"

Startled, the guard said:

"What do you mean by 'stagnant life'?"

Hearing the guard, Baldev began to laugh. As even one grain of salt or sugar reveals its taste, so Baldev felt the taste of his own understanding. Smiling, he said:

"The water of a stream keeps moving only so long as it flows along. But the moment it gets caught in some hollow or pit and the flow stops, it begins to rot with the earth. It rots so much that, far from being fit for bathing or drinking, by its own stench it begins to breed such diseased insects that even animals as large as elephants may get trapped there and lose their lives. I had already become fit to graze buffaloes, because I saw boys smaller than myself doing it. I told him, 'Babu, one should not delay even a single day in a good work. The one who delays is the one who regrets.' Babu too liked the idea. He brought a buffalo to rear."

At the mention of the buffalo, the guard praised him and said:

"The moment a person begins to earn and labour, he begins to remove the burden of his earth."

The guard's words pleased Baldev. As the same grain fills the stomach and also gives joy to the mind, so it happened in Baldev's mind too. Filled with feeling, he said:

"I have not yet told the real thing."

Saying this, he fell silent and began to remember. As a storyteller's enthusiasm rises when the listener gives assent, so Baldev too became excited. Like one of passion and pleasure gone astray from affairs of state, he repeated:

"Oh, the days of happiness passed away. Now shall I ever see them, or enjoy them? Oh, oh!"

The hanging at twelve disappeared from both their minds. There is one kind of hanging in which a person sits in the lap of the auspicious mother called resolve and mounts it smiling; and there is another in which a body leaves behind a mind broken and scattered into pieces.

Giving assent, the guard said: "What was it? What was it?"

Pressing his chin, Baldev said:

"Milk and curd kept coming from the buffalo. There were five of us, sturdy buffalo boys, who grazed buffaloes, and in the evening, while returning, would let them graze secretly in other people's fields. In the paddy month, we would pull out paddy too, bind straw, load it on the buffalo and bring it home. So much grain would pile up in the house that the sorrow of food had disappeared."

The guard asked:

"Did you keep grazing buffaloes all your days?"

Flashing his eyes and brows, Baldev said:

"You go too far, Brother! Life too increases and decreases with intelligence and strength. I do not remember exactly, but I remember this much: my duragaman had taken place. Babu too had died. Just

as people sell fields and go into service, I sold the buffaloes. But the relationship of the five buffalo boys increased further. Along with eating, drinking, story and kinship, we also began to hold panchayats. In the village itself stood the land and kachahri of an absentee landlord. I became friendly with the estate bailiff. By good fortune, I got the job of bailiff. I became the master of a hundred bighas of land."

Hearing the word "master", the guard said:

"Then respect and offerings must have begun in plenty?"

Hearing "respect and offerings", Baldev gave a wooden smile and said with regret:

"As respect and offerings increased before my face, abuse increased behind my back."

The guard asked: "Why so?"

Remembering something, Baldev said:

"I behaved in that way. You must have seen village leaders: before higher leaders they speak and act in one way, but among the people they turn around and change both face and conduct. I too began to do that. Among the landlord's men I did one thing; among the people, another."

Seeing the dice turn and overturn, the guard said:

"What do you mean?"

Baldev said: "Did I give any importance to the villagers? I would abuse someone for nothing, forcibly take something from someone. Likewise with women too; I would say something to one, something to another."

The guard asked: "Did no one answer back?"

Baldev said: "What answer could they give? They remained as a calf shrinks before the tethering post. On one side was the landlord's awe, on the other my own bullying strength."

In between, the guard said: "What was your own bullying strength?"

Baldev said: “Just as the eyes and ears are both main organs of the body, yet see how much difference there is between them. The poor ear is such a gentleman that it hears the best and the worst and does nothing. But the eye is such a rogue that as soon as it sees, sometimes it reddens and burns, sometimes it looks sideways, sometimes it becomes sly. In the same way, being fed and drunk richly, I always remained under a rising swagger.”

A wave rose in the guard’s mind. Waving, he said:

“Did the educated people of the village not understand this?”

Hearing the guard’s question, Baldev laughed a rosy laugh and said:

“Just as Krishna, on one side, is known as the thief of Bhadwa, and on the other as the Supreme Brahman; He is there for all, but for each He is according to what each one is. So too is the veena-bearing goddess. As the action, so the understanding. In the middle of that are the educated people of society too: according to the time, so their form.”

The guard asked:

“How is that?”

Hearing “How is that?”, Baldev steadied himself and said:

“Just as in work too a person becomes so absorbed that he forgets eating and drinking, the activities of his own life, and even home and family; and on the other side, the renunciate too becomes absorbed in Brahman and forgets everything. Both become wandering yogis, but are the two the same?”

The guard could not understand Baldev’s words. He said:

“Explain a little more clearly, Brother.”

As a tailor cuts pieces from a length of cloth made in a factory and makes garments of many colours, so Baldev shaped his explanation and said:

“Look. Take the week, the month and the year. Today is date one, and month one. It stands on the boundary between two years.

The end of one is the beginning of the other. All the rest is unripe. What will you call the twenty-second day inside a month? In the same way, what will you call the fifth day inside a week?"

Hearing Baldev, the guard tried to balance the matter and said:

"Well, leave the world and its ways. When thunder strikes, someone puts his hand on his own head."

The guard had not even finished when Baldev said in the middle:

"Brother, today it seems that it was not merely that I made a mistake; I had taken the road of mistake itself."

Startled, the guard said:

"What is that? What is that?"

Growing sad, Baldev began to speak:

"Brother, people say: as many mouths, so many paths. But among human beings, two roads have been made. One is the human road, on which no one stops another from walking. The other is a track where, apart from oneself, one does not consider anyone else human. I left the human road and took the cattle track."

As an iron tool, when it begins to grow blunt, is heated in fire by the smith, beaten, and then dipped in water, which is called tempering; and as a blade is sharpened by putting water again and again on stone and rubbing it, so the smith within the guard awakened the desire to smoke another cigarette. He took cigarettes from his pocket, kept one for himself, gave one to his companion, who had been listening in a daze after smoking ganja, and placed one in Baldev's hand, then struck the match. Taking one deep pull and releasing the smoke, he said:

"You two are wearing out your brains for nothing. What need is there for so much peeling and scraping? Look, even when there are a dozen items at a feast, the eater strikes at only one or two. It is the server's work to ask and serve. It is the eater's choice whether to eat or not. Tell us how the fate whose fruit you are going to receive today

came about."

The guard's question did not hurt Baldev. He felt the presence of a companion. As a young man feels joy in telling a friend the colourful stories of his in-laws' house, so Baldev felt. Sorrow too decreases when told to another. If not, why does anyone, with tears, tell the dry tale of separation from her husband? Making time to remember, Baldev said:

"Bhai Saheb, never in life had I known happiness like today's."

The guard asked:

"What do you mean?"

Baldev said:

"If even one listener is found for one's tale of pain, what could be better than that? Since you wished to hear the suffering of my heart, in the last watch of the last day of life, I wish to speak of the last step of the staircase."

The guard was moved by the joy of hearing Baldev's thought. He said:

"Just as sugar is the final arrangement of a rice-feast, if your sweet speech mixes with my speech, only then will it become rock sugar, hard like stone. That, indeed, is the end and edge of life."

Hearing the guard, the other guard said:

"Brother, with your dazed mind you have dazed him, and you yourself have gone dazed. Say it a little more neatly."

The first guard said: "All day you carry a ten-kilo gun on your shoulder. On which shoulder will you hang a thought as delicate as a flower but as heavy as stone? Even as it is, you keep changing shoulders, and both shoulders throb. Then clay is clay."

The second guard said: "Explain it a little clearly."

The first guard said: "Look. Just as this world is made of clay, so this body too is clay. Therefore, to understand the body, you have to understand clay. This world is made of many colours of clay. Counting them is no ordinary work. You see how seven colours have

become so many colours that even from a thread shop selling a hundred colours of thread, a tailor may return saying that thread of this particular colour is not available. The same is true of clay. One kind of clay makes firm ground, another makes smoothness. Not only that, one makes a substance hard as stone, while another forms a layer that gives birth to something like water, that is, water-mixed clay. Well, leave our talk. Poor Baldev's final time is passing; listen to him first. This listening will be like the listening of a traveller going far away at sunset, who reaches an unknown place and seeks a shelter to stop."

Looking towards Baldev, he said:

"First immerse your own matter, Baldev Bhai. After that, whatever happens will happen. The one who lives plays Phagua; for the one who dies, the account wakes."

As the last arrow comes out, as a heart pierced by thousands of arrows reaches the ghat of Sukh Sagar and longs to know where the most beautiful water is, where one may bathe; until the feet are washed with sacred water, they will keep slipping; until the feet stop slipping, one cannot walk straight; until one can stand straight, one cannot see the lotus-seat; and until one sees the lotus-seat, the bee, entangled in the net of pollen among the colour-changing lotus and kumudini, gathers the red and white end of the sari and protects life through the night like that Mother Yasoda who, pressing her darling to her breast, keeps telling him the tale and sorrow of life, so, wounded by the last arrow, pierced by the shaft, Baldev's power of resolve awoke. As if laying down a vow, Baldev said:

"Brother, in the world there are many kinds of well-wishers and unfriendly people, friends and honoured ones. But no; life becomes meaningful only for the one who is resolved, even if the resolve is the smallest of the small. Is not the first arrow of a human being the arrow of resolve? If not, what is life? Today I am receiving such thought and awareness as I had never dreamt even in a dream. And dreams too are dreams: some take one for a ride in an aeroplane, some through a fair of malarial mosquitoes."

As curiosity for a thing grows so much that one forgets everything and becomes restless to catch it, so the guard said:

"You must keep time in mind. The movement of time cannot be stopped by anyone's strength. Therefore place yourself within it."

Feeling this urging like someone holding a tray of khaja in one hand in the serving line of a feast and pressing the elders to accept, Baldev said:

"Brother, you are that friend who comes as a brother, so take it as my resolve that I am not lying. Today I understand this: by the force of strength, I kept looting and stealing the labour of others. Those from whom I stole were human beings like me, with two hands and two feet. Why did I become such a chhulah, such a slippery rogue? Society could have hanged me that very day and corrected its own rules. But that did not happen. Where did I make a mistake? I only did what the duty of the path of mistake required. I would have understood if I alone had been like that. But no; I saw it full on both sides, ahead and behind."

The guard said:

"Brother, you still have not said why such a punishment came."

Baldev fixed his gaze upon both guards and kept looking steadily. As a thought born thousands of miles away comes and attaches itself close by, so the distance between guard and criminal disappeared. Neither the guards said anything, nor Baldev. But the arrow of duty struck the guard. Looking at his watch, he said:

"Brother, we are not getting time now to hear more."

Seeing the shortage of time, Baldev became like a storyteller who tells the sorrow of life as a tale. Some particular incidents are such that the listener himself has suffered even stronger incidents. But does that mean his thought will not be accepted as thought? Therefore literature is a thing of society. For thought and suggestion, the door of readers and listeners must always remain open. There are many means of solution. So long as literature does not become a full

picture of society, and continues to become only the picture of a person, it is not wrong that disparity should remain between the two.

At the last turning of his life, Baldev spoke of the last attachment:

“Brother, a wind rose against the government. I too left bailiffship and became a leader. We won. Breakage began within ourselves. That is, breakage among all: farmers, traders, intellectuals, criminals. A net was spread across the region. I did not understand that with the breaking of leaders, I too had broken. On the surface, there was friendship; inside, enmity had formed. Just as a bitter disease has both bitter and sweet medicine, so I became trapped in the breakage. Election time came. A plan was made to loot money at someone’s place. But I did not understand that within the group there were also those who were going to commit murder. That is what happened. Someone else committed the murder, and my name was attached. My own mind says I am not the killer; but when the murder happened before my eyes, where was I?”

At that very moment, a dozen prepared guards entered.

Seeing the file of guards, the two guards and Baldev too started. One after another, all stood up. Coming out of the jail, everyone began to look at everyone else. ❑

Glossary

Aarati (आरती) – a ritual waving of light before a deity; offerings are often made during the aarati.

Adra (अद्रा) – a seasonal period associated with the first rains and agricultural preparation.

Aghan (अगहन) – a month of the Indian calendar, roughly November-December, important in the agricultural cycle.

Aghani paddy (अघनी धान) – paddy sown or harvested in the Aghan season.

Amti thorn (अमती काँट) – a thorny plant or thorn-cluster; used as an image of being caught in a difficult, tangled situation.

Aprajita (अपराजित) – a flowering creeper whose flowers may be blue, blackish or white; used as an image of changing colour and moral variation.

Arikanchan (अड़िकंचन) – a wild creeper; used as an image of tangled growth from which a tender shoot emerges.

Ashtayam/Ashtajam (अष्टयाम/अष्टजाम) – a devotional singing ritual that continues through eight watches of time, often with collective chanting.

Asin-Katik (आसिन-कातिक) – the months of Asin and Kartik in the Indian calendar, roughly September-November.

Badh-Bon (बाध-बोन) – the open field-and-grove landscape around a village.

Bapatuggar (बापटुग्गर) – a Maithili term for a child whose father has died; fatherless.

Bar (बर) – a larger fried preparation made from pulse paste, served with bari in rural Mithila.

Barahbarna (बरहबर्णा) – literally, a village of twelve varnas; used for a socially mixed village community.

Barham Baba (बरहम बाबा) – a local village deity worshipped at the Barham shrine.

Barham Sthan (बरहम स्थान) – the sacred public shrine of Barham Baba, used as a community meeting and worship place.

Bari (बरी) – small dried pulse dumplings, usually made from ground lentils and dried in the sun for later cooking. In The Gallows, bari also carries symbolic meaning as something desired in the middle of a feast, not as the final fulfilment of life.

Baua (बौआ) – an affectionate form of address for a son, boy, or younger male.

Bel gum (बेलक लस्सा) – gum or sticky paste made from the bel fruit, used traditionally for pasting or binding.

Bhang (भाँग) – an intoxicating preparation associated with hemp.

Bhajan (भजन) – a devotional song sung in praise of a deity.

Bhajan party (भजन पार्टी) – a village devotional singing group.

Bhai/Bhaiya (भाय/भैया) – brother; used as a familiar and emotional form of address.

Bigha (बीघा) – a traditional unit of land measurement.

Bhit (भीट) – raised land, usually near the homestead or village boundary, suitable for house-building, vegetables or orchards.

Cattle track/Dagahar (डगहर) – an irregular animal path through forest or scrub. In The Gallows, it becomes the central image of Baldev's wrong life-direction, opposed to the human road.

Cell No.1 (एक नम्बर सेल) – the special jail cell in which a condemned prisoner is kept after the court fixes the date of hanging.

Chaiti rain (चैती बरखा) – untimely or seasonal rain falling in the month of Chait, around March-April.

Chaur (चौर) – a low-lying wetland field, often vulnerable to floodwater and crop loss.

Chauri field (चौरी खेत) – a field situated in a chaur; low, wet and agriculturally uncertain.

Chhath (छठ) – a major ritual festival dedicated to the Sun, observed with fasting, offerings and devotional discipline.

Chhulah (छुलाह) – a slippery, cunning rogue; a jail-slang term for a sly prisoner whose real nature cannot be judged at once.

Chitrakoot (चित्रकूट) – a sacred place associated with Lord Ram; used as an image of many spiritual ghats or points of crossing.

Chulha (चुल्हि) – the traditional earthen hearth used for cooking.

Dalan (दलान) – a raised outer sitting space or verandah-like structure in a rural house, often used for receiving people and community

interaction.

Darwajja (दरवज्जा) – the outer entrance area of a rural house; often also a social sitting place.

Dheki (ढेकी) – a traditional wooden device used for husking paddy.

Dharma (धर्म) – moral duty, righteous conduct, or the deeper law by which life should be guided.

Dholak (ढोलक) – a two-headed hand drum used in folk music, bhajan, kirtan and dramatic performances.

Dhur (धुर) – a small traditional unit of land measurement in Bihar and Mithila.

Doot-bhoot (दूत-भूत) – ghostly or ominous forces of the night; used to suggest fear, unease and the supernatural intensity of the hour before hanging.

Dussehra of Jeth/Jeth Dussehra (जेठक दसहारा) – a local observance in the month of Jeth, distinct from the autumn Vijayadashami Dussehra.

Fansi (फाँसी) – hanging, the death penalty by noose. In The Gallows, it also carries symbolic meaning: a life caught in the noose of its own wrong path.

Fasari (फँसरी) – a noose or entangling loop; used to deepen the meaning of hanging as a condition of life, not merely a legal punishment.

Gamhar (गम्हार) – a tree whose wood is used locally; mentioned in a comparison of colour and texture.

Ganja (गाँजा) – cannabis used as an intoxicant.

Garma paddy (गरमा धान) – summer paddy crop, grown according to

time and water availability rather than the usual monsoon cycle.

Ghaghri (घाघरी) – a small skirt or frock-like garment, usually for a little girl.

Ghat (घाट) – a riverbank or stepped place of descent to water; also used metaphorically as a point of passage or reckoning.

Gohi/Gamar (गोहि/गमार) – monitor lizard and crocodile-like creatures; used to suggest the vast and mixed nature of society.

Gomukhi rosary (गोमुखी रुद्राक्ष माला) – a rosary kept inside a cloth bag shaped like a cow's mouth, used for devotional chanting.

Gurmi/Gulmi (गुर्मी/गुल्मी) – a leafy green vegetable growing in wet or low-lying fields.

Hariharkshetra (हरिहरक्षेत्र) – a sacred place and fair-site associated with religious pilgrimage and trade.

Harmonium (हरमुनियाँ) – a keyboard-based reed instrument widely used in bhajan, kirtan, folk theatre and Ramleela.

Hijra/Hijrani (हिजड़ा/हिजड़नी) – traditional terms for members of a gender-nonconforming performing community; used in the story as a social comparison.

Human road/Dagar (डगर) – the proper human path, marked by limits, direction and mutual recognition. Baldev's final self-realisation depends on the contrast between dagar and dagahar.

Indrasan (इन्द्रासन) – the throne of Indra, king of the gods; used as an image of pleasure, comfort and worldly privilege.

Jail ward (वार्ड) – a section of the prison where prisoners live collectively.

Jamuna/Yamuna (जमुना/यमुना) – the Yamuna river; if the local form is retained, write Jamuna consistently.

Jeth (जेठ) – a hot summer month of the Indian calendar, roughly May-June.

Jethua rain (जेठुआ बरखा) – early rain falling in the month of Jeth.

Jitiya (जितिया) – a fasting ritual observed by mothers for the long life and well-being of their children.

Jivani (जीवनी) – a knower or reader of life and growth; in the story, a person able to recognise plants by their form, leaves and branches.

Kamadhenu (कामधेनु) – the divine wish-fulfilling cow of Indian tradition; used as an image of abundance.

Karai plant (केराइक गाछ) – a wild plant mentioned as giving shade on the field-ridge.

Karma (कर्म) – action, deed, and the moral consequence of one's acts.

Katha (कट्ठा) – a traditional unit of land measurement, larger than a dhur and smaller than a bigha.

Khanjari (खौजरी) – a small hand-held percussion instrument; in Shambhudas, it becomes the central symbol of Shambhu's entry into music and performance.

Kherhi (खेरही) – a light, easily digestible variety of lentil, considered suitable for weak persons or infants.

Khurpi (खुरपी) – a small hand-tool used for weeding, digging and

loosening soil.

Kiul-Lakhisarai (क्यूल-लखीसराय) – a geographical reference in Bihar, mentioned in relation to the building material of the jail cell.

Kirtan (कीर्तन) – collective devotional singing, usually with repeated divine names and musical accompaniment.

Kirtan Mandali (कीर्तन मण्डली) – a village devotional singing circle or group.

Kos (कोस) – a traditional measure of distance, roughly two miles, though its exact length varies regionally.

Kurthi (कुरथी) – a pulse crop used for dal.

Laarhi-purain (लाढ़ि-पुरैन) – the ritual fee or customary payment connected with cutting the umbilical cord after childbirth.

Leela (लीला) – sacred or divine play; also used for dramatic enactment and for life understood as performance.

Mahadev Sthan (महादेव स्थान) – a shrine dedicated to Mahadev, Lord Shiva.

Mahant (महंथ) – a religious head or monastery-leader; used proverbially to suggest power gathered through a group.

Mahavirji Sthan (महावीरजी स्थान) – a shrine dedicated to Mahavirji, Hanuman.

Maituggar (मइटुग्गर) – a Maithili term for a child whose mother has died. The story title is rendered as The Motherless Ones, while the original word is retained in the text where it carries local social and emotional meaning.

Marua (मरूआ) – finger millet, a traditional grain crop.

Maund (मन) – a traditional unit of weight.

Met (मेट) – a senior prisoner or convict ward-leader who exercises authority over other prisoners and assigns work inside the jail.

Mrigashira (मिरगिसरा) – a lunar constellation associated with seasonal and agricultural timing.

Mungwa (मुंगबा) – a local votive offering made at the Barham shrine, measured by weight in the story.

Narak (नरक) – hell; used in the jail conversation to suggest the moral and physical extremity of prison life.

Narak Nivaran Chaturdashi (नरक निवारण चतुर्दशी) – a religious observance believed to help remove or ward off suffering connected with hell or sin.

Navah (नवाह) – a devotional ritual or singing programme continuing for nine days.

Nautanki (नौटंकी) – a popular North Indian folk-theatre form.

Nichhaur (निछौर) – a customary gift or offering given after childbirth, often to the birth attendant.

Nipnaun (निपनौन) – a customary childbirth-related payment or gift given to the birth attendant for her service.

Pachgachhia (पचगाछिया) – a place associated in the story with good singers and instrumentalists.

Palhain (पल्हैन) – the traditional village birth attendant or midwife.

Paurki (पौरकी) – a bird whose early-morning call awakens Baldev's half-conscious awareness; its call marks the arrival of light before the hanging.

Pavanot (पवनौट) – a small share of food or offering received from a household, often as part of customary service relations.

Phagua (फगुआ) – the spring festival of Holi, celebrated with colour, song and festivity.

Pipahi (पिपही) – a folk wind instrument used in village music and performances.

Pitha (पीठा) – a traditional rice-based preparation offered or eaten during rituals and festivals.

Raas (रास) – a devotional dramatic or dance tradition associated with Krishna.

Raga-Ragini (राग-रागिणी) – melodic forms in Indian music.

Rahar dal (राहैरक दालि) – pigeon-pea lentil, often valued more when old and well-matured.

Ramdhun (रामधुन) – repetitive devotional singing of Ram's name.

Ramkatha (रामकथा) – the story of Lord Ram.

Ramleela (रामलीला) – folk-theatre enactment of the life and deeds of Lord Ram.

Ramleela party (रामलीला पार्टी) – a travelling troupe that performs Ramleela, with actors, musicians, curtains, costumes and stage materials.

Rishi Gautam (ऋषि गौतम) – a sage from Indian mythic tradition; mentioned in connection with the moon, deception and curse.

Rohini (रोहिणी) – a lunar constellation associated with seasonal and agricultural timing.

Rudraksha (रुद्राक्ष) – sacred beads used for devotional chanting.

Sajmain (सजमैन) – a creeper-bearing pulse or vegetable plant; also used as an image of growth and care.

Sarkar (सरकार) – a respectful form of address meaning "sir" or "master", often used before authority.

Sawan (सौन) – the monsoon month of the Indian calendar, roughly July-August.

Seer (सेर) – a traditional unit of weight.

Semi-classical music (उपशास्त्रीय संगीत) – a musical form related to classical music but more flexible and closer to popular or regional performance traditions.

Sidha (सिदहा) – uncooked food-grain or provisions given as a customary offering or payment.

Sikki basket (सिक्की फुलडाली) – a basket made of sikki grass, often used in ritual contexts for flowers and offerings.

Son river (सोन नदी) – a major river of eastern India; its hardened sand is mentioned in the description of the jail cell's construction.

Tamma (तम्मा) – a small coin or traditional monetary unit mentioned in the context of customary childbirth gifts.

The Gallows (फाँसी) – the English title of Fansi; it carries both the literal sense of legal execution and the symbolic sense of moral reckoning.

Thekedar (ठीकेदार) – a prisoner-contractor or supply-handler inside the jail, informally controlling access to provisions such as oil and storehouse materials. The first occurrence should read: the Thekedar, the prisoner-contractor who controlled supplies.

Thikadas (ठीकादास) – a court singer who recognises Shambhu's musical gift and takes him along.

Vairagi (वैरागी) – a renunciant or detached person; used for one who remains inwardly unattached.

Verandah (ओसार) – a roofed open space attached to a rural house; in the story it is part of the domestic living area.

Vighnavadini (विघ्नवादिनी) – a goddess-like or personified force of obstruction; used with the goddess of sleep to heighten the night's fearful atmosphere.

Yajna (यज्ञ) – a sacred ritual offering, often accompanied by chanting and community participation.

Yog/Bhog (योग/भोग) – spiritual discipline and worldly enjoyment; used as a contrast in reflection on work, habit and entanglement.

Yug dharma (युगधर्म) – the spirit or accepted practice of the age; what the time itself seems to demand or normalise.

Notes